

RHETORIC, SPORT, AND QUEER/THEORY:  
GENDER AND ATHLETICISM IN QUEER SPORTS

A Dissertation

by

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Submitted to the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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August 2018

Major Subject: Communication

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines three case studies that draw on the queer potential of performances of gender and athleticism that challenge the gender binary in sport. For generations, sport has served as a social institution that divides athletes based on social constructions of sex and gender. In doing so, performances of gender in sport have come to be equated with performances of athleticism. This means that male athletes are expected to perform male athleticism and female athletes are expected to perform female athleticism. This dissertation looks for places within sport that represent a queer potential for disruption of the gender binary. By viewing individual performances of gender and athleticism that do not meet socially accepted performances of male and female athleticism as unstable differential relations, we can begin to destabilize the gender binary in sport. Using the case studies of *Outsports*, the sport of quidditch, and figure skater Johnny Weir, I argue that although there are places in sport that function as antagonisms, which have the potential to destabilize the gender binary, to some extent, they are still bound by normative understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. Within each case study, I explore the ways in which gender norms are constantly policed by the sport community and work to establish difference as a determinate identity, rather than unstable differential relations.

The work in this dissertation reveals the strength of the hegemonic discourses that surround sport, particularly in relation to sex, gender, and sexuality. Despite the queer potential of each case study, the male perspective dominates sports and reinforces the commitment to a gender binary. The commitment to the gender binary in sport will remain the downfall of most

attempts to queer sport because we are always limited to gendered and sexed categories of male and female. This is further compounded by the addition of sexuality to athletic identity. As the narratives used by *Outsports* show, coming out as a gay athlete is not novel or even disruptive. The inclusion of gay athletes into mainstream sports confines sexuality to the already gendered structure of sport. By participating in these hegemonic institutions they are further entrenching the negative impacts of the system, privileging those LGBTQ athletes who can serve as token examples of inclusion. With that in mind, I offer three critical implications for this research. First, I argue that these case studies suggest a move towards a queer understanding of athleticism. Second, as I have already eluded to, even in moments of queer resistance, sport still privileges the male identity. Third, I explore the implications of moving sport research into the field. Using the sport of quidditch, I argue that sport research could benefit from expanding the scope of the text by examining identity construction at the level of performance.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by thanking my advisor, Dr. Tasha Dubriwny, for her constant support throughout my time at Texas A&M. I am extremely grateful for her advice and guidance as I completed this project, as well as her enthusiasm for my research interests. I am also thankful for the generous feedback and support from my committee members during the dissertation process. They have helped shape this project from the idea in my head to a dissertation I can be proud of.

Second, I would like to say thank you to my family for always encouraging me and having confidence in me even when I doubted myself. Even though I was on the other side of the country, I knew they were always in my corner. Without the constant support of my family, especially my mother, I would not be who I am today. I will be forever grateful for their love and support. Although there are too many to name, I love each and every one of them and this would not be possible without them. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

To my team at Texas A&M – although you may have changed and grown over the years, each one of you has become part of my family. Thank you for joining me on this crazy journey. When I started working with the speech and debate team at Texas A&M I had no idea of how important it would be to me. Many of you had such an impact on my life and I will always be thankful for that. I wish you all the best in life.

Finally, thank you to the constant support from my friends and colleagues. Thank you to Katie Hodgdon for being my go-to person. It has been 6 long years and I would not change any moment of it. Thank you to my life-long duo partner Tom Roccotagliata for always answering my phone calls and listening to my rants. Your friendship means the world to me. Rachel

Whitten and David Munson are the dynamic duo that made writing possible. Thank you for the countless hours of writing at coffee shops, playing Pokémon Go, and meeting up for happy hours. Carrie Murawski and Alex Sousa are two of the most beautiful souls you will ever meet and I am so grateful to have them in my corner. Our friendship will surely continue to grow and I expect great things to come from them. And last but certainly not least, thank you to my roommate, Kyle Colglazier, for a wonderful final year in Texas. You have become such a wonderful friend, and an even better uncle to Fred and George. We all love you.

## CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

This work was supported by a dissertation committee consisting of Professor Tasha Dubriwny [advisor] and Professor Kristan Poirot of the Department of Communication, Professor Daniel Humphrey of the Department of Film Studies, and Professor Jennifer Jones Barbour of the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

Data for chapter three was approved through the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University in coordination with the United States Quidditch Association and the Wichita Falls Visitors Bureau. Data was obtained during a regional quidditch tournament in the American Southwest. The student completed all other work conducted for this dissertation independently.

Graduate study was supported by an assistantship with the Department of Communication at Texas A&M University. No additional funding was received for the completion of this dissertation.

## NOMENCLATURE

FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association
IAAF	International Association of Athletics Federation
IOC	International Olympic Committee
IQA	International Quidditch Association
IWFL	Independent Women's Football League
MLB	Major League Baseball
NBA	National Basketball Association
NFL	National Football League
NHL	National Hockey League
UIL	University Interscholastic League
USQA	United States Quidditch Association
WFL	Women's Football League

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Rhetoric, Sport, and Queering Athleticism**

17-year old Mack Beggs is a high school student from Texas who loves to wrestle. During the 2016-2017 season, Mack went undefeated as a high school wrestler in the University Interscholastic League (UIL), the agency that governs high school sports in the state of Texas. After accomplishing this amazing feat, it was no surprise when Beggs won his final match of the season at the state tournament, making him the 2017 Texas wrestling champion. However, it might come as a surprise that Mack Beggs was the 2017 *women's* wrestling champion. Beggs identifies as transgender, currently transitioning from female to male. Despite identifying and outwardly appearing as male, UIL rules specify that athletes must compete as the biological sex listed on their birth certificate, which means that Beggs must compete as female even though *he* identifies as male and takes testosterone supplements ("Transgender wrestler," 2017). Given the choice, Beggs would wrestle against other boys; however, UIL rules prevent him from doing so as men are not able to wrestle women. Sadly, Beggs won numerous matches because his opponents, female wrestlers, forfeited their matches. While this is a very specific case, the public attention given to Beggs highlights the way in which American sports in particular are dependent upon a strict gender binary, which places men and women into separate competition categories and defines how athletes perform gender.

The case of Beggs fits neatly within a growing body of scholarship of communication and sport, which draws from multiple disciplines and methodologies to expand current understandings of the "communicative practices that precede and frame the ways people

participate in sport” (Billings, Butterworth, & Turman, 2015, p. 6). Within the field of communication in particular, scholars are finding new ways to examine and interrogate various aspects of sport, or the “institutional arrangement of leagues, teams, officials, players, fans, and media” (Billings et al., 2015). In their introductory text to communication and sport, Andrew C. Billings, Michael L. Butterworth, and Paul D. Turman (2015) follow the sociological tradition in distinguishing between “sport” and “sports,” noting the necessity to define and delimit the scope of sport scholarship. Guttman (1978) argues that sports require a physical component and should be defined as “‘playful’, physical contests...which include an important measure of physical as well as intellectual skill” (p. 7). Therefore, individual contests such as football, tennis, or figure skating would be classified as *sports*, while *sport* refers to the larger institution of rules, regulations, and norms. In this dissertation, I follow the work of Billings et al. (2015) and use the term *sport* because it allows me to critically examine sport on an institutional and social level, including specific athletes, fans, leagues, and teams.

The study of communication and sport has a relatively short history compared to other areas of study, despite the fact that sport is inherently a communicative activity (Kassing et al., 2004). Sport scholarship has roots in the fields of sociology, kinesiology, anthropology, and psychology, which have contributed to current understandings of how and why people engage in sport (Billings et al., 2015). Historically, communication scholars who chose to focus on issues of sport were challenged for their decision to study something as unimportant as sport because it seemed to have no communicative value (Trujillo, 2003). For example, because most athletes do not give speeches or engage in politics, it was argued that they fell outside of the (generally accepted) scope of classical rhetorical criticism, one approach to communication studies. Even today, the study of sport is struggling to find a home in the field of communication, particularly

with rhetorical scholars. Recently, rhetorical scholars such as Michael Butterworth, Dan Grano, and Abraham Kahn have begun to interrogate sport as a cultural artifact worthy of rhetorical study. Recognizing the role that symbols play in creating and maintaining the culture of sport and those that participate in it, rhetorical scholars see the importance for further research in the area. This is not to say that rhetorical scholars have not analyzed sport as a text; however, I do argue that there has been a shift away from examining the rhetoric of sport commentary to a critique of sport in a broader sense. Consequently, we can and should expand our understanding of the rhetoric of sport to include things such as live viewings, news coverage, journalism, press conferences, image galleries, fan commentary, blogs, watch parties, athletic bodies, jersey selection, protest acts, and much more. Sport is a rich site of rhetorical analysis because it engages with a variety of rhetorical texts.

One area that has yet to be fully interrogated by rhetorical communication scholars in particular is the intersection of sport, gender, and queer theory. Despite a growing body of scholarship on the rhetoric of sport, few studies in the field of communication have approached the study of sport from a queer perspective. By this, I mean that current studies focus on defining and/or explaining the masculine culture of sport (Connell, 1995; Messner, 1992), particularly from a sociological perspective, rather than offering possibilities for change or alternate ways of doing gender and/or sex in sport. Historically, sex has come to refer to the biological categories of male, female, or intersex, which are identified by a combination of internal and external reproductive organs and chromosomes. Gender, on the other hand, refers to the roles, behaviors, actions, and bodies that are meant to signify a particular sex. However, as Judith Butler (1990) argues, sex and gender as two distinct, but intertwined social constructs that cannot be defined by biological traits or corporeal traits. According to Butler (1990), sex is not “a bodily given on

which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but... a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies” (pp. 2-3). As Johnson and Kivel (2007) explain, “The dominant ideological messages around gender and sexuality are created, perpetuated, maintained, and enforced in the social institutions and social structures of society, making dominant hegemonic categories seem natural and/or unproblematic” (p. 97).

Sport is one such place where social constructions of sex and gender are made to seem natural categories of division, particularly through the concept of athleticism. Following historical logics that view sex as distinct categories of bodies, athletes were divided into separate categories of male and female. The logic behind this division was that men would be given biological advantages over female athletes due to strength, stamina, and endurance. Over time, divisions in sport based on sex were turned into divisions based on gender. Consequently, gendered categories of sport became distinct ways of doing sport, also known as athleticism. As Meân and Kassing (2008) explain, athleticism as the way in which athletes *do* or perform athleticism (p. 127). Typically understood as a male/masculine construct, athleticism refers to the physical qualities of an athlete, such as strength, agility, or fitness. Because of this, Meân and Kassing argue that female athletes are expected to perform female athleticism because “gendered forms of athleticism re/presented in the media become inextricably linked with the performance of actual athletic identities” (p. 128.) As John Sloop (2012) argues, “As an entire generation of sports sociologists and cultural critics have argued, sports competitions – divided into men’s and women’s events – assume a strict gender binary” (p. 83). Athleticism, then, is one way in which athletes are expected to adhere to a gender binary in sport, which is predicated on social constructions of biological sex.

In the edited volume *Sport, Sexualities, and Queer/Theory*, Jayne Caudwell (2006) and colleagues theorize about the ways in which queer theory can inform sociological research on sport, sex, and gender. Caudwell and her fellow contributors recognize the importance of approaching sport from a queer perspective because it “has the potential to alter how we think about sexualities, desires, and bodies” (Sykes, 2006, p. 26). This line of thinking departs from past approaches of studying sport that have failed to account for the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality, choosing to focus specifically on ideas of sex and gender, without problematizing the role of sexuality in sport. The remainder of the volume offers insight into what a queering of sport research might look like, including ways to disrupt heteronormative structures and ways of thinking about queer bodies and queer identities in sport. Johnson and Kivel (2007) argue that those interested in sport “might use queer theory to extend our examinations of leisure and sport constraints to explore how power relations reflect issues of negation (control and evading control) in leisure and sport (p. 103). This scholarship is a clear warrant for further work that approaches the study of sport and gender from a queer perspective, particularly one that is rooted in communication. Approaching sport from a queer rhetorical perspective allows us to problematize and challenge the heteronormative structures that both bind and police sport within binary gender system. For rhetorical scholars in particular, this project is important for theorizing how gender and athleticism is constructed and managed through bodies and discourse.

A queer body of scholarship on communication and sport would look for places where we can productively use sport myths, narratives, and structures to deconstruct gender in sport. Such scholarship should not necessarily look for particular athletes who identify as queer, although that could serve as a starting point for queer research. Instead, following the work of

Charles Morris III (2007), I would argue that we should look for moments that signify a queer understanding of gender and athleticism. In his analysis of Abraham Lincoln, Morris does not take issue with whether or not Lincoln was or was not gay. Instead, Morris uses Lincoln's *queerness* to discuss how historical narratives attempt to frame him, despite living in a time where sexuality was not tied to desire. Likewise, in an analysis of Eleanor Roosevelt, Dana Cloud (2007) argues that relegating someone's queerness to questions of "is or is not" detracts from the potential meaning of how that queerness is articulated and what it means for public discourse. By looking through archives of sport knowledge, history, and literature, we can use accepted forms of knowledge to critique normalized structures. Michael Butterworth (2006) offers up one such analysis using Mike Piazza and the speculations of his perceived homosexuality. In response to these speculations, Piazza embodied the norms of hegemonic masculinity in order to confirm his heterosexuality and thus reinforce his masculinity. At the same time, however, Butterworth (2006) argues that Piazza has moments of slippage, which suggest a willingness to accept a gay teammate as long as he "does his job on the field" (p. 151). It is in these slippages, the places in between, where sex, gender, and sexuality are not fully institutionalized, that rhetorical scholars can interrogate ways in which the gender binary is challenged in sport.

Today, places within sport that promote ideas of diversity and inclusion are often praised for the ways in which sex, gender, and sexuality are subverted by individual actions. In this dissertation, I approach contemporary sport contexts of sport, media, and athletes through a queer lens in order to question how these contexts challenge the gender binary through performances of athleticism. The examination of sport from a queer perspective is important, because as Heather Skyes (2006) argues, "Queer theorizing moves across interdisciplinary

boundaries, employs deconstructive logics of paradox and contradiction while self-reflexively assessing its unpredictable, yet necessary political and ethical commitment” (p. 26-27). A queer sport project looks for places to deconstruct gender and athleticism within a heavily gendered context. Because of the commitment to the gender binary in sport, I argue that it is an ideal place to interrogate how we communicate about sex, gender, and sexuality. In what follows, I start by grounding the project within current scholarship of rhetoric and sport. Next, I review pertinent literature in both queer theory and sport to demonstrate the importance for approaching sport communication from a queer perspective. Finally, I offer a synopsis of the individual case studies included in this dissertation, which focus on queer sport, media, and athletes.

### ***Sport, Gender, and Queer/Theory***

Using the case of Mack Beggs as a starting point, it is clear that the current debate over the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality in sport raises interesting questions about identity. However, issues of identity and the performance of that identity are nothing new in sport. Athletes are continually policed by the social structures that define sport, limiting the way athletes can express gender and athleticism. Although Mack Beggs is a current case of a queer body in sport, few do not know the name of South African runner Caster Semenya. Semenya was scrutinized by the media for appearing too masculine after she posted times in the 100m dash that resembled times of men more than those of women. Consequently, Semenya was forced to undergo multiple levels of genetic testing, revealing her increased testosterone levels as a result of hyper-androgenism, a genetic condition causing increased testosterone production in women. As Sloop (2012) concludes in his critical reading of Semenya,

The future of international competitive sport, then, promises to push our configuration of



gender. Whether one believes, as does Myron Genel, an IAAF panelist, that Semenya (and others) “have to be allowed to compete as female” because they were raised as female (Jacobsen, 2009) or one believes, as does Alice Dreger (2009), that it is acceptable to determine gender categories, as long as this determination is understood as a “sports” decision, sports is one of the grounds on which the meaning of gender is most clearly delineated. (p. 92)

Although the use of gender testing in sport has reinforced problematic binaries of sex and gender, it is also beneficial to our understandings of gendered bodies. According to Young (2015), “Semenya’s case reflects a public anxiety about the intersexed body, a body that disrupts heteronormative sex and gender binaries and raises questions about the ‘natural’ body” (p. 344). The case of Caster Semenya highlights Judith Butler’s (1990) critique of sex, gender, and sexuality. Because there is no such thing as a true biological sex, attempts to place bodies like Semenya’s into binary views of sex, gender, and sexuality cause gender trouble. The disruption of gender binaries allows for deeper understandings of the relationship between sex and gender, which are often viewed as fixed constructs. However, when moments arise that force us to question these assumptions, we can productively interrogate the unstable relationship.

For rhetorical scholars, the public spectacle of sport creates a context where exaggerated versions of identity are put on public display. When sporting events are televised and broadcasted, sporting bodies are put on display for the world to see. For example, the 2018 Olympics reached a primetime viewership of 21.9 million (Pallotta, 2018). Although this number is down from the 2014 Olympics in Sochi, the Olympics games uses sport and sporting bodies as a means for entertainment. Likewise, the 2018 Super Bowl drew a viewership of 103.4 million people (“Super Bowl LII,” 2018). The positioning of sport and sporting bodies in such a hyper

visual setting creates an environment where our social structures of gender are isolated in specific activities and performances, which are consumed by millions. By examining the performance of gender within the context of sport, it is possible to isolate localized examples and case studies that further our understanding of the ways in which gender and athleticism is constructed, and how individuals and communities create a shared sense of meaning. So, what does studying sport and gender get us if we are simply relegating our study of it to the terms provided? Perhaps, here is where the introduction of queer theory into the study of sport and gender becomes both helpful and impactful to ways of doing and undoing gender. In the following sections, I review the necessary literature needed to evaluate those places in sport where the gender binary is purposefully challenged by athletes, fans, and organized activities. I begin by situating this dissertation within the literature of rhetoric, gender, and sport.

### ***Rhetoric, Gender, and Sport***

Sport, on both the institutional and recreational level, plays a vital role in shaping American culture, particularly because “sport and games are sources of meaning and shared symbols in our society” (Kraft & Brummett, 2009, p. 12). In other words, our interactions with sport not only shape our understanding of what sport is, but also how sport fits within society. Whether these interactions are on the playing field or the courts, by watching or reading sport media, or just attending a sporting event, they serve a vital role in meaning making. It is in the moments of interaction where meaning is created and sport becomes rhetorical. As Rachel Kraft and Barry Brummett argue, “There is rhetoric in sport and games: they are persuasive communications, texts that, intentionally or unintentionally, influence the social and political attitudes held by the public” (2009, p. 11).

The use of myth and narrative has played a large role in the relationship between rhetoric and sport because of the mythic themes and narratives that drive the culture of sport, which are often closely tied with a particular community. When a team wins or loses, the community that supports that team also feels a sense of triumph or loss. Likewise, sport heroes become mythic community figures that teach valuable cultural lessons. We can look to athletes such as Muhammad Ali, Greg Louganis, Joe Louis, Billie Jean King, Arthur Ashe, Jackie Robinson, and many others that had to overcome adversity and racial/sexual animosity in sport. Any of these individuals could represent rhetorical meaning for a community, or their actions could have had their own rhetorical meaning. For example, in an analysis of the Brown's (football) departure from and return to Cleveland, Daniel J. O'Rourke III (2003) argues that myths can help to foster symbolic relationships between a community and a professional sports team. O'Rourke (2003) argues that when the original Cleveland Browns left the city of Cleveland, the community felt betrayed because of the role the team played in crafting their identity as citizens of Cleveland. O'Rourke (2003) concluded that the narrative of sports is best understood as a myth of identity and community because of the way in which sports are given meaning by members of a community. It is through these myths and narratives that sport is given rhetorical significance because the myths and narratives being used reflect current social and political issues.

Following Kenneth Burke, scholars have also taken a metaphoric approach to studying sport, looking for ways that sport functions as a metaphor for (predominantly white American) ways of life. For instance, Michael Butterworth (2007) critiques Bush's use of metaphor during his support of the Iraqi National Soccer Team, arguing that Bush used the soccer team as symbolic representation of the powerful effects of democracy. This metaphor allowed President Bush to use sport as a vehicle to further his political agenda of spreading democracy in the

Middle East. Additionally, Butterworth (2010) argues that baseball can and does serve as a metaphor for democracy in the United States. In claiming baseball as America's "national pastime," the activity of baseball becomes a way to reframe American values, especially post 9/11. More specifically, the myth of baseball as a 'pure sport' prevents it from being seen as something political. However, Butterworth argues that it in fact reflects life outside of the ballpark and is imbued with rhetorical meaning, especially when George W. Bush throws the first pitch on the anniversary of 9/11 at Yankee Stadium. In both of these cases, Butterworth argues that sport becomes a metaphor for the strength of democracy and can be used in a discretely political way.

Recent trends in the study of sport have taken up the issue of gender, turning a critical eye to the way in which gender is produced and maintained within a sport context. Despite the varied approaches to the study of sport, one thing remains constant: sport is rich site for the study of sex and gender because of the commitment to rigid understandings of gendered identity. Professional sports have a long history of promoting and defining both masculinity (Connell, 1990; Crosset, 1990; Hargreaves, 1994; Kimmel, 1994; Messner, 2002) and femininity (Young, 1990), often resulting in conflict between the two iterations of gender. The professional sports culture shapes the general idea of sports and conveys the message that in order to be accepted as an athlete, the athlete must embody masculinity. In this culture, to embody masculinity is to avoid any signs of weakness, often seen as feminine or a form of femininity. Connell (1995) and Messner (1992) explain this phenomenon as a product of hegemonic masculinity. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) articulate that hegemonic masculinity as a "pattern of practice" that privileges masculinity over femininity and thus men over women and even other men (p. 832). Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity is distinguishable from other forms of masculinity that are

subordinated or deemed as “not normal.” In his analysis of professional baseball player Nolan Ryan, Nick Trujillo argues that hegemonic masculinity functioned to mediate Ryan’s identity as the archetypal American sports hero (1991). Athletes, coaches, owners, fans, and most importantly, the media, co-construct this vision by rewarding those athletes who are the most masculine and thus most successful, like Nolan Ryan. In this way, professional sport is able to maintain this hegemonic narrative and use it to shape and reinforce a culture that has come to represent the idea of an ideal athlete. Furthermore, Connell (1995) and Messner (1992) explain that this hegemonic masculinity is created and recreated as athletes invent new ways to represent this vision of an ideal athlete. Coaches reward athletes who are mentally tough, physically strong, and show dedication on the field. The media, then, uses these same qualities to define the way they report on today’s athletes—often focusing on those athletes who are the most successful and embody one masculine quality or another. This understanding of masculinity in sport makes for a particularly useful site of study as scholars theorize ways to explain, deal with, and overcome the heteronormative structures that define sport.

With all of this focus on the masculine athlete and issues of masculinity, it is easy to see how the male athlete is both privileged and policed by sport. However, female athletes are subjected to the same, if not worse scrutiny when it comes to performances of gender. For rhetorical scholars, the athletic body is an ideal place to study sex and gender. John M. Sloop (2012) has brought the issue of the body into sport with an analysis of South African runner, Caster Semenya. As bodies are increasingly called into question, particularly sporting bodies in the media, we are offered insights into constructions of gender and how that gender identity is both challenged and policed by sport. For example, the *ESPN* body image issues put naked athletic bodies on display in order to show what a true athlete looks like, which is often not what

we are told it should look like. Furthermore, when female athletes enter male spaces, we see a reaffirmation of male superiority. For instance, Butterworth (2008) examined the story of Katie Hnida, a kicker at Colorado University. During Hnida's time on the team, she faced threats of rape and was continually harassed by other teammates and fans. Butterworth argued that the responses to Hnida reaffirmed the superiority of male space, allowing the marginalization of Hnida and other female athletes at the University of Colorado. Comments reduced her to "a girl" and a "distraction" effectively undermining any sense of equality. Ultimately, she was classified as an intruder due to the masculine culture of the team. This intruder effect demonstrates how stubborn and rigid conceptions of gender are today, especially in sport.

With recent advancements in science and technology, athletes are scrutinized more than ever for their performance of gender, especially as scientific evidence is used to support socially constructed relations between sex and gender. As Toby Miller (2010) argues, "Because the performance of gender is simultaneously enacted with athletic performance, traits and behaviors typically classified as masculine or feminine may instead be constructed as desirable athletic behavior" (p. 166). This assumption of reiterated masculinity and femininity is exemplary of Judith Butler's understanding of sex and gender as social constructions rather than fixed identities. Athleticism is one way of performing gender because athletic identity is defined by binary categories of sex and gender. For men, being a successful athlete signifies masculinity and thus maleness. Erica Rand (2013) argues that sex segregation in sport results in two key problems: "that athleticism itself has a gender, which is male or at least masculine; and that sports segregated by sex should have appropriate, recognizable differences in the male and female versions of them" (p. 445). As Butler (1998) argues, "[I]deals of gender are not only imposed retrospectively on athletic activity by photography or by the media, but they form part

of its meaning and structure, such that no athletic activity can proceed without some reference to these ideals” (para. 3). Because of the close tie between athleticism and masculinity, female athletes are caught in the double bind of being “good athletes” while also trying to perform femininity. Female athletes perform their understandings of femininity in order to be accepted as “woman,” while still trying to participate in sport. Butler (1998) explains, “gender ideals are staged and contested in a public and dramatic form in women's sports in particular, so that women's sports, as they often have in the past, call into question what we take for granted as idealized feminine morphologies” (para. 3). Therefore, when women do not conform to socially accepted ideas of the feminine athlete, they are rejected as women. For instance, tennis star Serena Williams has often been criticized for her masculine form and manly grunts. Williams, arguably one of the best tennis players in the world, is criticized for looking “too manly” in a skirt. However, as Michael Messner (2007) argues, “Organized sport, as a cultural sphere defined largely by patriarchal priorities, will continue to be an important arena in which emerging images of active, fit, and muscular women are forged, interpreted, contested, and incorporated” (p. 44). Butler (1998) furthers this sentiment when she argues, “Women's sports have the power to rearticulate gender ideals such that those very athletic women's bodies that, at one time, are considered outside the norm (too much, too masculine, even monstrous), can come, over time, to constitute a new ideal of accomplishment and grace, a standard for women's achievement” (para. 3). The work done by both Messner and Butler demonstrates the ability for research at the intersection of sport and gender to inform “a liberating social practice” (Messner, 2007, p. 44) that challenges binary assumptions of sex, gender and sexuality, as well as norms and standards of the athletic body (Butler, 1998).

### *Towards a Queer Understanding of Sport*

A queer approach to the rhetorical study of sport adds to current conversations of gender and sport by interrogating the ways in which sex, gender, and sexuality are deployed within a sport context. Drawing heavily on work in post-structuralism and feminism, the aim of queer theory is to challenge any assumption of a unified homosexual subject and forever destabilize identity categories. According to Teresa de Lauretis (1991), “queer theory conveys a double emphasis – on the conceptual and speculative work involved in discourse production, and on the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own discourses and their constructed silences” (p. iv). Since its conception, queer theory has developed around the work of scholars such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Leo Bersani, and countless others. For many, the word queer has become a political project of disruption and underscores the use of queer theory as a way of doing theory that is both disruptive and deconstructive. However, the word queer also exists as a coalition of marginalized identities that do not conform to the “normal.” Taking queer as its subject, queer theory works against normalization, which contains binary understandings of gender and heteronormativity at its core.

The aim of queer theory is to look for places where the stable views of sex, gender, and desire are rendered incoherent through acts or gestures. Seidman (1996), in an early analysis of queer theory explains,

Queer theory wishes to challenge the regime of sexuality itself, that is, the knowledges that construct the self as sexual and that assumes heterosexuality and homosexuality as categories marking the truth of sexual selves...Queer theorists view heterosexuality and homosexuality not simply as identities or social statuses but as categories of knowledge, a language that frames what we know as bodies, desires,



sexualities, identities. This is a normative language as it shapes moral boundaries and political hierarchies. (pp. 12-13)

As Seidman articulates, queer theory signals a shift from the assimilationist politics of lesbian and gay studies to a politics of difference that questions the structures and institutional practices that produce discourses of sexuality. Following this line of thought, queer is less a stable unified identity and more a critique of identity. This makes queer theory a crucial tool for rhetorical scholars interested in the intersection of sex, gender, and communication. Following the work of Caudwell (2006), I use queer/theory to signify how queer and queer theory are intertwined, yet remain distinct from one another. In this dissertation, I utilize the term queer to signify bodies, identities, and sexualities that are unstable, or deemed unnatural or unusual. One such identity, homosexuality, is often viewed as a determinate identity that is positioned against heterosexuality. However, as Lee Edelman (1994) argues, instead of viewing homosexual difference as a determinate identity, we should instead view it as an unstable differential relation (p. 3). As Judith Butler (1990) argued, gender is a performance, and sex, gender, and sexuality can only be understood in relation to one another. She further claims that limiting gender and sex to confined categories is troublesome for identity. Jagose (1996) says of Butler,

Instead of naturalizing the same-sex desire of homosexuality—which is the usual strategy of gay and lesbian movements—Butler contests the truth of gender itself, arguing that any commitment to gender identity works ultimately against the legitimization of homosexual subjects. (p. 84)

Instead of thinking of gender as a strict construct, Butler argues that the individual performs gender. Butler (1990) states, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of

substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 33). As a result, there is no such thing as authentic gender. In fact, heterosexuality, to Butler, is a discursive practice that works to normalize discourse about sex and gender. As Sloop (2004) explains, the heavy policing of gender norms has reinforced binary gender system that relies on heterosexual norms that make gender essential rather than contingent.

Taking up queer theory from a rhetorical perspective allows rhetorical scholars to interrogate questions of sex, gender, and sexuality within rhetorical texts. Communication scholars such as E. Patrick Johnson (2001), Lisa Henderson (2001), John Nguyet Erni (1998), and Charles Morris (1998) have long recognized the ability of queer theory to inform communication projects and have subsequently advanced queer scholarship within the field of communication. In an edited volume on queer theory and communication, Yep, Lovass, and Elia (2003) outline the history of queer theory and communication, reflecting on the slow uptake of queer theory as a method. However, as Karma Chavez (2003) notes, “Yep, Lovaas, and Elia incited a conversation that systematically brought *queer* critique to the study of human communication” (p. 83). Since the publication of Yep, Lovass, and Elia’s work, rhetorical scholars such as Charles Morris, III, Karma Chavez, John Sloop, and Jeffrey Bennett have cultivated a way of doing rhetorical criticism rooted in queer theory, which allows rhetorical scholars to question the theories used to do rhetorical research and the artifacts chosen for study.

For queer rhetorical scholars, queer theory serves as a way to critically interrogate sex, gender, and sexuality or to follow Butler, to make gender trouble. Drawing from the work of Butler, Sloop interrogates gender in contemporary American contexts, looking for places where gender ambiguity is policed by hegemonic structures. Sloop (2004), quoting Butler, argues that the task of gender critique is

To expose the contingent acts that create the appearance of a naturalistic necessity ... is a task that now takes on the added burden of showing how the very notion of the subject, intelligible only through its appearance as gendered, admits of possibilities that have been forcibly foreclosed by the various reifications of gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies. (p. 7)

Using Butler's notion of performativity as a starting point, Sloop (2004) concludes that the purpose of gender criticism "as being the notation and critique of gender performance, as well as the provision of critical readings that could work to undermine bi-gender normativity" (p. 7). Following this logic, Sloop examines five cases of gender ambiguity that are normalized through public discourse. As Sloop (2004) argues, the purpose of his work is,

[T]o provide critical readings of several contemporary cases of sexual/gender ambiguity in order to emphasize, and ultimately struggle with, the gender and sexual norms that "America" stands for, that each of us learns to protect through our language and our behavior toward one another and toward our "selves." (p. 2)

Instead of reading each case of gender ambiguity as a transgression to hegemonic structures, Sloop uses them to interrogate how dominant narratives close off alternatives and reiterate norms that eventually lead to punishment or exclusion. Thus, through the use of gender trouble, Sloop articulates the potential for rhetorical critics to deconstruct gender. As Sloop (2004) concludes, "Critical rhetoric forces us not only to function as critics, then, but to function as rhetoricians, to read the material discourse of everyday life and write about it in such a way that our encounters with the word are thereafter altered" (p. 144). The power of critical rhetoric lies within queer projects that challenge our ways of being and knowing.

Not only does queer theory inform contemporary rhetorical discourse, but it informs ways of dealing with historical discourse as well. In his work on queer public address, Charles Morris III (2007) uses queer rhetorical theory to complicate historical discourse, arguing that a queer approach to rhetorical history aims,

To disrupt the silence regarding nonnormative sexualities as it relates to American historical discourse, to undermine the governing heteronormativity in its disciplinary conventions and articulations, and to queer...the objects, methods, and theories within this field of inquiry. (p. 5)

Morris argues that queer public address is imperative because of its position as foundational to rhetorical studies. In the introduction to *Queering Public Address*, Morris (2007) reflects on Jennifer Terry's work regarding "deviant historiography" where she argues, "Effective history exposes not the events and actors elided by traditional history, but instead lay bare the *processes* and *operations* by which these elisions occurred...[looking] not only for how subjects are produced and policed, but how they are resistant and excessive to the very discourse from which they emerge" (p. 12). In other words, these historical discourses create the context for rhetorical performances, allowing for the discovery of marginalized voices. Morris (2007a) articulates this idea best, and therefore I quote him at length,

How those historical discourses have sought to forge queer resistance, counter-publics, individual and collective identities and identifications, and social transformation often, sometimes in contradictory ways, tell us much about our past and the challenges of our present and future. They remind us that we must listen not only for eloquent and disciplinary silences, but also for unconventional resistive articulations, muteness that articulated complicity in relations of power, and those powerful discourses that gave

voice to the otherwise mute. And those multiple silences and voices puzzle for us the stakes involved in our own modes of inquiry. (p. 13)

Morris (2007) concludes that queering “[the rhetorical discipline] enacts the more radical vision of rearticulating that tradition from its very origins or roots: queering our disciplinary history, and thus our discipline, by queering rhetorical history” (p. 5). It is from this starting point that his edited volume, *Queering Public Address*, comes to life as a means for critiquing not only queer history, but also rhetorical history itself.

Queer theory also serves as a way of understanding identity positions and critiquing the way in which those positions are socially constructed. Drawing on work from Yep, Lovaas, and Elia, Karma Chavez (2013) argues that, “queer theory shifts away from viewing identity as stable and fixed to approach ‘sexual identities as multiple, unstable, and fluid social constructions interesting with race, class, and gender among other’ (2003, p. 4)” (p. 85). Chavez critiques queer theory for its position of the white, gay, cis-gender subject at the center of its lens of study. Instead, Chavez calls for more intersectionality in queer studies that recognizes the messiness of identity. In her work on queer migrants, Chavez articulates this idea by constructing similarities between queer bodies and migrants. Chavez (2013) argues, “Migrants and queers challenge conventional belonging because they are both figured as strangers and threats to how the nation sees itself now, and, more importantly, how it hopes to see itself in the future” (p. 150). By positioning queers and migrants in similar subject positions, queer theorists such as Chavez can articulate implications for critiquing and deconstructing identity positions.

Rhetorical scholar Jeffrey Bennett (2009) further articulates the useful nature of queer theory in deconstructing and destabilizing identity, particularly when that identity is intertwined with social structures that work to stabilize the gender binary. In his analysis of gay men’s

inability to donate blood, Bennett utilizes queer theory as a means for critiquing civic participation. Bennett argues that when organizations such as the Red Cross label queer blood as something inherently bad, they deny the subject position of the queer body. Historically, the Red Cross has denied gay men from participating in blood drives because of the association between gay men and HIV/AIDS. Following the attacks on September 11, 2001 gay men lined up to donate blood, but were turned away. Bennett argues that this act of turning away gay men limited their ability to participate as citizens. Therefore, by positioning “queer blood” as negative, the surrounding discourses also punished queer bodies, which were viewed as different. However, by critiquing the structures that relegated gay blood to the margins, Bennett argues that identity is always intertwined with social structures, such as civic participation. It is in places like these that queer bodies in particular become important sites of investigation for rhetorical scholars. Furthermore, when we view these moments as unstable differential relations, their queer potential can be realized.

The context of sport, then, is an area where queer rhetorical theory can engage with issues of sex, gender, and sexuality as unstable differential relations rather than fixed constructs. This context is of particular importance for rhetorical study for multiple reasons. First, sport is tied to American culture, both socially and politically. On a societal level, sport reflects American values of hard work, competition, and democracy. However, as Michael Butterworth has argued in various places, the political nature of sport cannot be overlooked. Second, sport is bound by strict gender divisions, which are predicated on social constructions of biological sex to regulate athletic bodies. For generations, sport has been divided between men and women, predominantly being controlled by the former, reflecting the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Third, there are places within sport that represent a challenge to normative gender identities, and

these places are rich rhetorical contexts. The story of Mac Beggs that begins this dissertation represents one such instance where sex, gender, and sport are in conflict. The context of sport serves as a mechanism for maintaining normative sex and gender categories. A queer approach to sport communication questions need for gendered sport, interrogating the need to separate sports and athletes on a binary. Work in the field of sociology has recognized these connections, calling for a merging of queer theory and sport. In Jayne Caudwell's edited volume, *Sport, Sexualities, and Queer/Theory*, scholars propose what a queering of sport would look like by providing "an accessible source of literature for those interested in sport and the complexities of sexuality" (p. 1).

John Sloop has been one of forerunners in approaching the intersection of sport and gender from a communication perspective. In his article "Riding in Cars Between Men," John Sloop (2005) examines responses to the first female NASCAR driver following her "failed" attempt to compete in the sport. Sloop argues that the presence of female driver Deborah Renshaw created discourse that solidified her "femininity" in a masculine domain due to the gendered history of the automobile and its relation to masculinity. Sloop (2005) argues that this context provides the "opportunity to problematize the particular configuration of gender performance and gender expectations loosely shared in contemporary US culture, as well as a route to further conversations about the body's relationship to technology" (p. 193). However, this case, which functions under the "first woman" narrative, exemplifies the way in which "common sense" ideologies are maintained in our society. Drawing from work in queer theory, Sloop's criticism exposes problematic gender assumptions in sport by calling attention to cultural logics that drive a binary understanding of gender. Sloop provides another example of queering sport in his analysis of South African runner Caster Semenya. As previously articulated, Sloop

argues that the discourse surrounding Semenya created a cultural panic as discursive logics sought to explain Semenya's unique case within current understandings of the binary nature of gender. Following a call for more queer work in sport, Sloop (2012) concludes that, "It is in these moments that gender is done, undone, redone. It is at these moments that 'we' critics must problematize culture when we would like other results and relish those moments of silence that reflect our understandings of a better world" (p. 92).

Images of athletes and representations of the body are places where queer theory and the rhetoric of sport can productively overlap because the body often becomes a site of contestation where sex, gender, and sexuality are put in conflict, while also being made hyper visual (see Butler, 1998). Athletes, particularly professional athletes are continually put on display for the public to see, making their bodies the center of attention. One particularly relevant example is former University of Missouri football player, Michael Sam. Michael Sam became the first openly gay football player to enter the NFL following his selection by the St. Louis Rams. Prior to coming out, Sam fit cultural assumptions of masculine athlete and straight man, earning conference honors in his position. However, after Sam came out, attention was brought to his body, which now signified a homosexual desire. Consequently, following the logic of Edelman (1994), Sam's homosexual identity was constructed as a determinate entity that represented by homosexual difference. For instance, during the NFL combine event attention was brought to Sam's apparent arousal in his spandex shorts (Petchesky, 2014). Oates (2007) argues that the NFL draft is inherently homoerotic because of its need to put male bodies on display, particularly black bodies, and sell them the highest bidder. Additionally, Sam's presence in the locker room created anxieties about the male gaze being returned on men in the locker room. Thomas (1993) theorizes how the presence of an openly gay man increases homosexual anxiety in the locker



room shower; despite the usual homosocial bonding that happens there. Both of these instances reveal hypocrisies that are only exposed by problematizing the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality in sport. Thus, queer bodies in the context of sport allow us to rethink how gender is both done and undone on a daily basis.

Since the publishing of *Sport, Sexualities, and Queer/Theory*, the queering of sport scholarship has seen little headway. Up until now, most studies of sport have fallen victim to the same gay-white-male-privilege paradigm that examines the role of gay men in sport. That is not to say that there have not been valuable contributions to the study of sport and gender; however, I think it is important to draw attention to the very normalized discourse that drives research on sport which is more concerned with understanding power structures rather than resisting or overcoming them. This is partly due to our ways of knowing and existing in the context of sport. Judith Butler argues that we exist in a grid of intelligibility that makes identity recognizable. From a queer perspective, it is important to not fall into these grids, but rather to be open to possibilities that have not yet manifested or become legible. If we are willing to truly queer sport scholarship, we have to be willing to theorize radically new ways of doing sport scholarship, particularly in regards to sex, gender, and sexuality. For example, in an analysis of gay masculinity, which has become more important with the rise of openly gay athletes, Tim Edwards suggests that there are problems thinking of and expressing what it means to “queer” masculinity. Edwards (2005) argues that instead of focusing on the relationship between gay men and masculinity, we need to address “an entirely different question of *heterosexual* men’s relationship to their *heterosexuality*, not just to their masculinity” (p. 65). If we were to successfully queer sport scholarship, I believe it could possibly challenge the masculine

discourse that drives both the activity of sport and the way research is done regarding sex and gender specifically.

As I have argued throughout the literature review, sport is an ideal place to engage with social constructions of sex, gender, and athleticism because of the strict adherence to the gender binary in sport. The role that sport plays in constituting society allows for an examination of the performance of gender identity in a hyper visual setting. For LGBTQ athletes, sport represents a place where their identities are continually challenged because they do not fit perceived social norms and are always under constant surveillance. Therefore, when places in sport emerge that embrace difference, these places are celebrated for their commitment to diversity and inclusion. These openly LGBTQ friendly spaces in sport present direct challenges to the heteronormative assumptions of sport, functioning as unstable differential relations, or as Kevin DeLuca would argue, antagonisms. Deluca explains,

Antagonisms make possible the investigation, disarticulation, and rearticulation of a hegemonic discourse. Antagonisms point to the limit of a discourse. An antagonism occurs at the point of the relation of the discourse to the surrounding life world and shows the impossibility of the discourse constituting a permanently closed or sutured totality. (1999, p. 226)

When these antagonistic spaces are positioned against the discourses of heteronormativity and the gender binary, they expose the limits of that discourse in sport. Therefore, it is important to question how these spaces function to disrupt discourse through their queer potential. By viewing these sites of difference as unstable differential relations, they offer queer potential for queering both sport scholarship and gender in sport. This leads to one particular driving question of this dissertation: how do contemporary sport contexts challenge the binary nature of gender and

athleticism? At the same time, we must also question the limits of achieving inclusivity in sport by attending to the ways in which the queer potential is domesticated and normalized. These questions follow the work done by John Sloop in *Disciplining Gender* (2004), which is interested in the way dominant discourses close off alternative readings of gender ambiguity. I argue that while unstable spaces in sport can function as antagonisms to disrupt gender, to some extent, they are still bound by binary understandings of sex and gender. It is because of this, the tension between disruption and control that we are able to destabilize the gender binary. In the following section, I present three cases that are praised for their ability to challenge assumptions of gender in sport. Together, these case studies form a contemporary sport context that allows me to engage with a queer sport project.

## **Chapter Outlines**

This dissertation examines three particular case studies that push back against the binary notions of sex and gender that sport are predicated upon. I argue that approaching these particular case studies from a queer rhetorical perspective is important because each represents a way in which queer sport communication can be mobilized to interrogate gender in sport. I argue that these contemporary contexts are sites of identity construction that are bound by and resistant to the gender norms of sport. Taking up various case studies within sport allows me to effectively interrogate my guiding research questions by approaching sport from a variety of outlets. First, interrogating the construction and deployment of identity at the institutional level of sport is important because the activities that we consider sport effectively police gender identity. From a young age, athletes are divided into different divisions based on perceived differences in sex and gender. Consequently, athletes are expected to perform athleticism in ways that fit their prescribed sex and gender. This has led not only to separate divisions for men

and women to account for perceived disparities in strength, but also, in some cases, separate sports. For example, while football has been deemed a *masculine* sport, figure skating is deemed a *feminine* one. Second, I argue that media spaces are an important place to interrogate sport communications because of the large fan bases created around individual sports, teams, and athletes. These places serve as sites of identity construction for fans of sport as they work to maintain a culture through participation. Finally, individual athletes represent the foundation through which we create and maintain gendered athletic identities. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the way in which athletes communicate their identity through performances of athleticism. Following the work of Judith Butler, this dissertation recognizes the importance of performance as a rhetorical artifact. In the following sections, I outline individual case studies for each of the major areas of analysis: sport, sport media, and athlete.

## ***Chapter II: Outsports***

In chapter two, I analyze the ways in which *Outsports*, a sport media website, uses sport narratives to challenge assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality in sport. The *Outsports* website is an appropriate case study because it uses personal narratives to make public arguments about heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity in sport. In 1999, Cyd Zeigler Jr. and Jim Buzinski founded *Outsports*, a website dedicated to LGBTQ issues in sport. The website features articles, stories, editorials, and images of LGBTQ athletes and their fans, recognizing that “it’s not a gay thing; it’s a guy thing” (2007, p. 31). As curators of the website, Zeigler and Buzinski maintain a space that celebrates LGBTQ athletes and fans alike. Michael O’Keefe (2007), writer for the *New York Daily News*, writes that, “*Outsports* has become a must-read for many journalists, and Cyd and Jim have become an important source for those of us looking for cutting-edge story ideas from the intersection of sports, culture, art, and politics” (p. x). However, for all that

*Outsports* does to promote diversity and inclusion in sport, it still promotes a homonormative view of sport that features cisgender, gay male athletes. This is most prominent in the most-read stories of 2017, which revolve around successful gay male athletes and their personal narratives.

As an online space, the website rhetorically crafts the image of the acceptable LGBTQ athlete and fan through the use of three key narratives: Authentic Identity, Athletic Success, and Social Acceptance. By providing narratives of diverse athletes, the website offers a queer potential for athletes and fans alike to challenge assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality in sport. At the same, however, it is important to question whether the website truly creates an inclusive space that challenges the way in which sport journalism is done. Therefore, it is important that we interrogate how the website goes about challenging our assumptions of sport while also being critical of the message crafted by the rhetoric of the website. In this chapter, I make two arguments. First, I argue that when mainstream media and journalism outlets repost stories written by *Outsports*, these narratives have the potential to disrupt hegemonic discourses by implicating media outlets in their own hegemonic practices. Second, I argue that the narratives created by *Outsports* risk normalizing queer bodies and identities by packaging them in ways that are easily accepted and non-threatening.

### ***Chapter III: Quidditch***

In chapter three, I focus on the institutional level of sport through the examination of a particular sporting activity. The sport of quidditch is celebrated for its commitment to gender inclusivity through the creation and implementation of gender-maximum rule. The sport of quidditch is a quickly growing activity on college campuses across the country, having started at Middlebury College in 2005 (“History of Quidditch”). Modeled after the wizarding sport found in the *Harry Potter* series (Rowling), muggle (non-wizard) quidditch is played with seven people

on a team, combining elements of rugby, dodgeball, and capture the flag. In Rowling's version of the sport, players fly on broomsticks, trying to score by sending the Quaffle (magic ball) through one of three hoops. Because players of non-magical quidditch cannot fly like those in *Harry Potter*, players remain on the ground, holding broomsticks between their legs as they try to score. In an effort to regulate the sport, a group of students founded the International Quidditch Association (IQA), with the American division, US Quidditch Association (USQ), following shortly after. Both the IQA and USQ have crafted extensive rulebooks, allowing for uniformity among competitions. Given the growing popularity of the sport and the institutional organization of the league, quidditch is an ideal place to take up the queer potential of a sporting activity and its ability to challenge assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality.

The sport of quidditch is an ideal case study because of its commitment to creating a sport that is gender inclusive, but also subscribes to binary views of sex, gender, and sexuality. According to the latest edition of the USQA rulebook,

A quidditch game allows each team to have a maximum of four players who identify as the same gender in active play on the field at the same time. This number increases to five once the seekers enter the game. The gender that a player identifies with is considered to be that player's gender, which may or may not correspond with that person's sex. This is commonly referred to as the gender maximum rule. USQ accepts those who don't identify within the binary gender system and acknowledges that not all of our players identify as male or female. USQ welcomes people of all identities and genders into our league. (p. 10)

Crafting their own version of title IX legislation, called title IX <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>, the USQA recognizes the need for inclusivity in sport. Jeffrey O. Segrave (2016) argues that the sport of quidditch,

Challenges the ‘normalness’ and ‘naturalness’ of the masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual divide, and instead, offers in practice what the fictive quidditch offers in the imagination, the opportunity to envision and promote a gender order in sport that does not rely on traditional gender hegemonic conceptions and practices. (p. 1311)

In his 2016 study of quidditch, Segrave recognizes the potential for the muggle sport to offer an inclusive space for athletes of all identities, regardless of gender identity. Expanding on this idea, I would argue that approaching quidditch from a queer perspective allows for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the sport as it takes this assumption of inclusivity as a starting point and looks for ways in which gender and athleticism are performed on the field. However, as this particular passage demonstrates, even in sports that are committed to inclusivity subscribe to binary understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality.

In analyzing the sport of quidditch, I utilize rhetorical field methods during a collegiate quidditch tournament in spring 2018. Quidditch has become a popular sport in Texas, with the state of Texas having multiple teams place in the top 25 at the 2017 US Quidditch Cup. Quidditch tournaments bring together teams from across the country, allowing for multiple matches to happen at a time. It is in these spaces that athletic identity is created and maintained by individuals and the sport culture. Following the work that appears in the edited volume *Text + Field* (2016), I examine how sex, gender, and identity are constructed during a quidditch match. In order to use rhetorical field methods, my text includes the images, sounds, and actions during a quidditch tournament. I argue that rhetorical field methods are appropriate for this chapter because of the nature of the text. As the McKinnon, Asen, Chavez, and Howard (2016) argue in the introduction to *Text + Field*,

All rhetorical scholars, regardless of what they analyze, approach texts in distinctive

ways that comport with their critical inclinations. Field methods allow us greater opportunities for talking about and articulating these unique methodological processes, to make them discernible to our reading audiences. (p. 3)

Thus, rhetorical field methods present an opportunity to not only examine the sport of quidditch from a rhetorical perspective, but it allows the researcher to reflect on how that research is done, something crucial to a queer theorist. In this chapter, I argue that the sport of quidditch has the potential to function to disrupt binary assumptions of sex and gender in sport by allowing athletes to perform and construct athleticism in a competitive collegiate activity that is not divided along a socially constructed binary. More specifically, I argue that the queer potential of quidditch happens through the physical altering of performance space and through embodied performances of gender and athleticism.

#### ***Chapter IV: Johnny Weir***

Chapter four examines individual performances of gender and athleticism within the context of sport. This chapter takes up Johnny Weir as a case study because of his notoriety for pushing gender boundaries as a professional figure skater. Mary Louise Adams (2011) offers a queer account of professional figure skating, recognizing that her work has clear ties to recent calls for a queering of sport. In her book, Adams traces the history of masculinity in men's figure skating arguing that, compared to professional sports like football or basketball, figure skating is always already a sport where the masculinity of the athlete is questioned. Adams argues that it is precisely because of figure skating's uneasy relationship to hegemonic masculinity that makes figure skating an ideal place to challenge ideologies of gender. This tension between sex, gender, and sexuality (obviously only gay men are figure skaters) makes figure skating a superlative place for queer performances of gender, like those by Johnny Weir.



This chapter takes up Johnny Weir's performance of gender and athleticism as the text by examining various routines throughout his career. In doing so, I apply delivery as a critical methodology, which looks for specific moments of gender performance during individual figure skating routines. As a professional figure skater, Johnny Weir has made numerous appearances at major figure skating events such as Worlds, the Olympic games, and the US Championships. Each routine is a moment where Weir not only performs as a figure skater, but also performs his gender identity. Therefore, I argue that a critical reading of Johnny Weir is important for understanding how performance functions as a method of persuasion. Furthermore, I argue that the performances themselves represent a productive queer expression of sport that rearticulates athleticism in new ways, by drawing on the fluidity of gender.

## **Conclusion**

While writing this dissertation, Mack Beggs was granted the opportunity to wrestle in the men's division on the national level thanks to a USA wrestling policy that allows for self-identification of gender. While this sounds very optimistic and hopeful for Beggs, it actually presents a multitude of problems. First, this policy does not pertain to the state of Texas where Beggs wrestles. Next school year, Beggs will still be wrestling against girls as a senior. Second, the USA wrestling policy further entrenches gender binaries in order to accommodate transgender athletes. For example, if a wrestler has not hit puberty, they are allowed to wrestle as their self-identified gender. If the wrestler has hit puberty, the problems arise. For Beggs, the case is simple. Because Beggs is transitioning from female to male, he is allowed to identify as male and compete against other boys. However, if an athlete like Beggs were transitioning from male to female, that individual would need to keep their testosterone under a certain level. In order to be considered female, this athlete would also be subjected to periodic testing to confirm

their status as female. While the issue of gender testing seems like a deviation from the proposed course of study, I use it here because it underscores the need to approach the study of sport from a perspective that questions the very structures that define it. A queer rhetorical approach to the study of sport is necessary for fully understanding how the performance of gender is tied to understandings of athleticism.

The use of queer theory to study of gender and athleticism in sport offers rhetorical scholars new ways to interrogate gender. Because of the way in which athleticism functions as an extension of gender, sport offers unique case studies for thinking about alternative ways of doing and undoing gender. As is the case with Caster Semenya, current binary structures of gender marginalize and subjugate those identities that do not fit acceptable performances of gender. Essentially, what many deem as simply a harmless activity, sport is in fact a complex system that disciplines gender identity. However, when bodies and actions do not conform to those preconceived iterations of gender, when they create unstable differential relations, the limitations of the normalized system are exposed. It is during these times that rhetorical scholars can productively interrogate the relationship between gender and athleticism in sport.

In this dissertation, I take up individual performances of gender and athleticism as unstable differential relations, which represent a queer potential for destabilizing the gender binary. Over the course of these three case studies, I argue that although there are places in sport that function as antagonisms, which have the potential to destabilize the gender binary, to some extent, they are still bound by normative understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. Within each case study, I explore the ways in which gender norms are constantly policed by the sport community and work to establish difference as a determinate identity, rather than unstable differential relations.

## CHAPTER II

### CHALLENGING GENDER IN SPORT JOURNALISM:

#### A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF *OUTSPORTS* TOP 25 MOST-READ ARTICLES OF 2017

##### **Introduction**

“Courage is contagious” is written in light gray lettering at the top of the *Outsports* webpage. There are no rainbow flags or bright colors of any kind that may indicate support for the LGBTQ community. The banner underneath the “courage is contagious” slogan is solid blue with white lettering next to the *SB Nation* logo, a prominent sport media company. Scrolling down the page, images feature an array of (mostly) male athletes, something to be expected of a sports website. At first glance, one may even miss the subtle section headings that read “coming out stories” and “out athletes,” which are hidden among “fanposts” and “tickets.” Still, the website is unmistakably geared toward a particular audience, the LGBTQ community. Stories feature athletes of all levels opening up about their sexuality, discussions of LGBTQ issues in sport, and even the announcement of an upcoming pride parade. Managed by the sport media outlet *SB Nation, Outsports* (Outsports.com) is a sport news site that focuses on LGBTQ athletes, sports, and their fans. Today, LGBTQ athletes remain on the margins of sport, particularly when it comes to sport media and journalism. Rampant heteronormativity, or the assumption that all athletes are heterosexual, in professional sport has long suggested that LGBTQ athletes are not welcome. Consequently, most coverage of LGBTQ athletes is limited to coming out announcements, or is focused on athletes that are deemed acceptable by sport media sites. For example, openly gay athletes Jason Collins and Michael Sam received a large amount of coverage following their coming out announcements because of their rhetorical strategy that

positioned them as both gay and an athlete. Despite Collins and Sam coming out in 2013 and 2014 respectively, other LGBTQ athletes received little attention from the media, partly because few athletes are open about their sexuality in the “big four” North American sports, which dominate media coverage. The 2018 Olympic games saw a dramatic rise in LGBTQ athlete coverage, particularly of American favorites Adam Rippon (figure skating) and Gus Kenworthy (skiing) both of who were deemed acceptable by mainstream media. Despite these occasional increases in media coverage, LGBTQ athletes and fans have few outlets for engaging in sport media.

Recognizing this lack in coverage, Cyd Zeigler and Jim Buzinski founded *Outsports* in 1999 as a way for LGBTQ athletes and fans to connect with each other and engage with sport media. Today, the site remains a leader in LGBTQ sport content through the posting of daily articles, photo galleries, and fan content. Furthermore, Zeigler and Buzinski have helped numerous athletes use *Outsports* as a platform for coming out and sharing their identity. Unlike other forms of sport media, the founders of *Outsports* have built the website around a particular identity: LGBTQ individuals interested in sport. In doing so, they have attempted to use *Outsports* as a sport media space that pushes back against heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity, and social constructions of sex and gender that drive sport. In their book, *The Outsports Revolution*, Buzinski and Zeigler (2007) explain the need for a website such as *Outsports*, stating, “[T]here was no media outlet at the time that catered to gay sports fans and athletes. No one had yet been able to tap into the growing nexus of gays and sports, and very few had even tried” (p. 47). And those sources that did cover LGBTQ athletes (and by this I mean gay men) such as *Out Magazine* did so when there was “direct gay tie-in (for example, when Sheryl Swoopes came out)” (Buzinski & Zeigler, 2007, p. 51). When mainstream media outlets

do cover LGBTQ athletes, they turn to *Outsports* as a primary source of content. As Buzinski and Zeigler (2007) note,

It is not an exaggeration to say that *Outsports* has driven coverage of gays and lesbians in sport. We have made dozens of appearances on sports talk radio to discuss the issue, debated the subject on *CNN* and *ESPN*, and been the source for dozens of articles in the mainstream media. The list includes the *BBC*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Sports Illustrated (SI)*, *Playboy*, *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Daily News*, and *ESPN the Magazine*, among others. (p. xv)

As a sport media space on the margins of sport culture, *Outsports* is shaping discourse on LGBTQ athletes by providing the content for mainstream publication. When mainstream media outlets want information about LGBTQ athletes, not only do they turn to *Outsports* for content, they use their stories as models, particularly narratives of LGBTQ athletes coming out and finding acceptance and success within sport.

The creation and maintenance of a sport media site that caters to LGBTQ athletes, sports, and fans is important for challenging assumptions of gender and athleticism in sport. However, for all that *Outsports* does to promote diversity and inclusion, such as the creation of a Instagram account that features LGBTQ athletes, the narratives appearing in their featured articles are far less radical than other content appearing on the site. In this chapter, I analyze how the potential to disrupt gendered discourses in sport through an LGBTQ sport media website is undermined by narratives that normalize sex, gender, and sexuality. This analysis draws on articles posted to the website about LGBTQ athletes, sports, and media during 2017. At the conclusion of 2017 *Outsports* posted a new article listing the top 25 most read stories of 2017, many of which relied on narratives of identity, courage, and success. I have chosen these articles for analysis because

they attracted the most attention and provided the most visibility for website content. I argue that *Outsports* normalizes binary assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality in sport through the use of narrative form. I identify three narratives used by *Outsports* to make public moral arguments about LGBTQ athletes and provide logical reasons for their acceptance in sport. These include the Authentic Identity narrative, the Athletic Success narrative, and the Social Acceptance Narrative. Although *Outsports* makes public arguments about LGBTQ athletes, the narratives are constrained by their position in a space on the margin of sport that is geared to LGBTQ athletes and fans. In this way, the narratives construct a homonormative view of sport that continues to privilege cisgender, gay male athletes. However, there are moments where the narratives utilized by *Outsports* have the potential to disrupt sport culture, particularly as these narratives move beyond the margins of sport.

### **De/Constructing Identity in Sport Media**

Sport media and journalism plays a large role in how ideas of sex, gender, and sexuality are shaped and disseminated through the lens of sport (Rowe & McKay, 1998). Building on work from Rowe and McKay, Caroline Symons (2010) argues, “Sport had become one of the most media covered, globalized, consumed, and naturalizing institutions for ‘defining preferred and disparaged forms of masculinity and femininity, instructing boys and men in the ‘art’ of making certain kinds of men’ (Rowe & McKay, 1998, p. 118)” (p. 2). In their work on the Televised Sports Manhood Formula, Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt (2000) argue that media viewers are presented with “narrow and stereotypical messages about race, gender, and violence” (p. 381). While examining sports programs on ESPN, Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt identified 10 themes that are ever present in sport media, which together make up the Televised Sports Manhood Formula. Such themes include white males as the voices of authority, sports is a man’s

world, women are sexy props or prizes for men's successful sport performances or consumption choices, boys will be (violent) boys, and sports is war. Although some of these themes are indicative of a larger cultural problem with race, many of them reflect problems with the hegemonic masculine culture of the NFL in particular and sport in general. Through an analysis of sports talk radio, Zagacki and Grano (2005) argue that fantasy themes are often used by sport media to create a shared rhetorical vision. Drawing on work from Bormann (1984), Zagacki and Grano (2005) articulate, "[A] rhetorical vision is 'a unified putting together of the various shared fantasies' that construct a credible interpretation of reality (p. 47). Zagacki and Grano (2005) argue that sport media relies on these fantasy themes to create an entire narrative about the event, often embellishing stories or emphasizing particular details for dramatic effect. They explain,

Fantasy themes relating to setting, characters, and plotlines together create a compelling and dramatic version of reality. By describing characteristics of a scene, setting themes reveal where the drama takes place or where the characters act. Character themes disclose the qualities, motives, and characteristics of the actors in the drama, often portraying them as heroes and villains. (Zagacki & Grano, 2005, p. 48)

It is through these narratives that myths and fantasies become reality. This means that sports such as football are narrated as a violent and masculine drama to millions of viewers, and therefore discredits any identity that does not embody this stance. Hardin et al. (2009) argue that similar fantasies and narratives are seen in newspaper columns featuring sport media. They go on to explain that it is up to members of the media to guard this hegemonic culture that has been created. Although athletes may feel they control the culture, it is actually part of a much larger social entity. Therefore, revolutionary progress towards diversity and inclusion cannot be

achieved as long as media and journalists alike “reinforce sexual norms and conceal institutional homophobia (Hardin et al., 2009, p. 197).

The use of fantasy themes and a shared rhetorical vision as a way to police the boundaries of sport culture gives credence to the use of narrative paradigm for making public moral arguments about current problems within sport. In developing the narrative paradigm, Walter Fisher (1984) builds upon Bormann’s (1972) concepts of “fantasy themes” and “rhetorical vision,” arguing, “From the narrative view, each of these concepts translates into dramatic stories constituting the fabric of social reality for those who compose them” (p. 7). Recognizing that the rational world paradigm – which assumes that for human communication to be rhetorical it must be in argumentative form – limits forms of argumentation, Fisher developed the narrative paradigm to push back against these notions. According to Fisher (1984), humans are storytellers who use narratives in order to help others understand our life choices. As Fisher articulates, “By ‘narration,’ I refer to a theory of symbolic actions – words and/or deeds – that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them” (p. 2). Fisher notes that these stories help in the process of decision-making and communication by providing “good reasons” that vary among forms of communication. Fisher explains that these “good reasons” are the aspects of stories that help individuals make choices about truth, coherency, and effectiveness of the narrative, and can take the form of history, biography, culture, and character, among others, and help to articulate narrative rationality. According to Fisher,

[R]ationality is determined by the nature of the persons as narrative beings—their inherent awareness of *narrative probability*, what constitutes a coherent story, and their habit of testing *narrative fidelity*, whether the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives. (p. 7)



Unlike other forms of reasoning, narrative rationality is inherently descriptive, working against hierarchical systems of knowing. Fisher concludes, “The world is a set of stories which must be chosen among to live the good life in a process of continual recreation” (p. 7). Ultimately, Fisher suggests that communication does not need to be argumentative to be considered rhetorical. The narrative paradigm reconstitutes reason and rationality to make them applicable to all forms of communication, not just argumentation.

In addition to developing a basis for understanding and evaluating narratives as arguments, Fisher (1984) proposes that the narrative paradigm can resolve problems with public moral argument that pit experts against the public. According to Fisher, public moral argument refers to (1) those arguments that are made public and available for public consumption, (2) rely on issues of morality such as life and death, and (3) involves public disputes and debates about moral issues (p. 12). Most importantly, according to Fisher, public moral argument “is a form of controversy that inherently crosses fields” (p. 12). The presence of transgender athletes in sport is a prime example of public moral argument. For example, the case of Caster Semenya not only crosses fields of sport, communication, sociology, policy, and many others, but it invokes public discussions about sex and gender (see Sloop, 2012). Fisher explains this best by stating,

Any story, any form of rhetorical communication, not only says something about the world, it also implies an audience, persons who conceive of themselves in very specific ways. If a story denies a person’s self-conception, it does not matter what it says about the world. In the instance of protest, the rival factions’ stories deny each other in respect to self-conceptions and the world. The only way to bridge this gap, if it can be bridged through discourse, is by telling stories that do not negate the self-conceptions people hold of themselves. (p. 14)

When public moral arguments deny existence or personal subject positions, narratives are seen as incommensurable. Therefore, in order to be a successful narrative argument, it must be presented as truthful and reflect the ideas of common sense.

Dominant narratives of sport are fragile constructs that are viciously guarded by the hegemonic majority of sport, the media included. When Katie Hnida joined the football team at the University of Colorado she was continually harassed by her male teammates (Butterworth, 2008). Because football is viewed as a masculine space, Hnida's presence threatened the masculine culture, which privileged male bodies. Butterworth (2008) argued that responses from the University and media outlets classified Hnida as an intruder, effectively marginalizing her identity and participation in the sport. As Lewis (1987) argues, "A dominant narrative structure is fragile because the requirement of internal consistency is permanent, while the ability of people responding to events to maintain that consistency is inevitably partial and temporary" (p. 296). In an analysis of President Reagan's use of narrative form, Lewis argues that Reagan relied on a dominant narrative that assumed insularity from material conditions and isolation from social commentary. In the culture of sport, the dominant narrative reflects an adherence to a unified idea of the masculine athlete. When narratives emerge that challenge the authority of the dominant narrative of sport, the consistency of that narrative is challenged. When sport journalists construct narratives of LGBTQ participation and success in sport, the dominant narrative is no longer isolated from social commentary about inclusion.

Sport journalism is one way of disseminating narratives that challenge the hegemonic discourse of sport. As communication scholar Barbara Barnett (2005) stated, "Journalism is the art and practice of telling stories" (p. 13). Humans are unique in that they share stories, which

manifest in journalistic practices. Chiaoning Su (2014) turns to James Carey's work on journalism, stating,

James Carey's (1989) ritual view of communication sees journalism as a symbolic process of reality production, maintenance, repair, and transformation, while journalistic genres are forms of story-telling shaped by the prevalent culture. The major function of journalism thus is not information transmission but rather the integration of readers in an 'imagined community' through symbolism and storytelling, thus affirming their group identity and common values (Anderson, 1983). (p. 486)

This is particularly true for those who consume sport. Sport journalism aids in constructing social reality for audiences of sport. Su (2014) articulates, "Using repetitive and culturally resonant archetypal frameworks, news writers and sports commentators transform mundane sports stories into authoritative moral allegories that fit dominant cultural preferences" (p. 486). Through a narrative analysis of Linsanity – a term used to describe NBA phenom Jeremy Lin – Su identifies ways in which Lin is constructed as both a modern hero and a humble underdog. Su (2014) argues that, "These findings illuminate the symbolic and meaning-making function of sports journalism" (p. 486).

A productive queer sport project looks for ways in which assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality in sport can be deconstructed. One such way to queer sport scholarship is by interrogating socially accepted ideals of gender and athleticism through narrative. Raymond Boyle and Richard Haynes (2009) argue,

The problematizing of male identity, then, has the potential to produce new avenues of

research for sport-media studies that bring together interdisciplinary concerns for the production, distribution and consumption of sporting texts and wider issues of power in popular culture. (p. 136)

Bridging the space between scholarship in communication and sociology, scholars of sport have worked to articulate how gender in particular is shaped and potentially deconstructed by sport.

Boyle and Haynes further explain,

[M]edia sport is a powerful context for the representation of gender identities, and men's place in the world is often framed, one way or another, by their interest or lack of interest in sport. As this binary social code suggests, sport is heavily laden with values of maleness. Men who abstain from male sporting subcultures can be stereotyped as being effeminate in character, in a context where a feminine trait is viewed as negative, less empowering, attribute. Male sporting subcultures, therefore, operate twin dynamics of misogynist and homophobic behavior. (p. 136)

There are a few important points that need to be articulated from this passage in order to frame an unstudied area of sport media: LGBTQ sport media. First, as Boyle and Haynes suggest, gender identity is largely tied to an interest, or lack of interest, in sport. When Buzinski and Zeigler founded *Outsports*, they did so in a time when “the dominant notion that gay people, particularly gay men, simply don't care about sports; it's fashion and gossip about B-list celebrities they most want to read about in the pages of the tabloids that cater to them” (Buzinski & Zeigler, 2007, p. 47). This assumption relies on the misconception that sexual orientation is largely tied to gender identity. For example, lesbian women are often gendered as masculine, justifying their participation and interest in sport. Second, the binary social code of participation determines who participates and when. From this viewpoint, it would make sense that gay men

(seen as effeminate) would choose a sport such as figure skating (viewed as feminine) over football (viewed as masculine). Again, this view links gender identity, sexual orientation, and sport identity without regard for individual perceptions of identity. In 1934, George Herbert Mead argued that human society is made up of individuals who share common interests, but are ultimately engaged in conflict with other individuals or groups. He states that these “conflict[s] are settled or terminated by reconstructions of the particular social situations, and modifications of the given framework of social relationships...” (p. 308). With the rise of LGBTQ athletes, sport has become a site of conflict, particularly as individuals struggle over personal opinions about gay athletes and what it means to be an athlete. It is in this space of struggle that a media site like *Outsports* has the potential to disrupt gendered discourses in sport, particularly through the use of narrative form. *Outsports* has the potential to queer assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality in sport by disrupting the rhetorical vision of sport through the use of narrative form. These narratives rely on the function of storytelling to affirm the subject positions of LGBTQ athletes while preempting negative public responses to their participation. *Outsports* utilizes these narratives to deconstruct the binary nature of gender of sport and sport media. By making public arguments about identity and success, *Outsports* pushes back against dominant sport narratives that work to gender athletic bodies and protect a hegemonic rhetorical vision. In the following section, I articulate specific ways that *Outsports* attempts to rhetorically construct narratives that are accepted by mainstream viewers of sport, while also turning unstable differential relations of gender and athleticism into fixed identities.

### **A Narrative Analysis of *Outsports***

The use of narrative form in sport media and journalism is a common practice, particularly given the public nature of sport and the need to make the athletes’ lives public.

When these narratives are adopted by a sport media website dedicated to LGBTQ athletes, the narratives have the potential to challenge binary assumptions that drive sports. Therefore, I turn to an analysis of the most read articles posted to *Outsports.com* in 2017 in order to analyze how specific narratives are constructed and disseminated. According to *Outsports*, “At least 80% of our 25 most-read stories were positive. Only two were flat-out negative. It’s a great reminder of the importance of stories that focus on inclusion and success, something *Outsports* will certainly take with it going into 2018” (*Outsports*, 2017). While most of the articles were about gay men, some of the most viewed articles featured transgender athletes and their successes. However, of those, only one article featured a female athlete, and one more featured a female coach in the NFL. Of the 25 articles, 10 were related to the sport of football with other stories featuring swimming and diving, running, baseball, hockey, wrestling, and weightlifting. Additionally, the stories covered a variety of levels, including professional, collegiate, and high school sports. Finally, several of the articles were written by the athletes themselves and then edited by writers at *Outsports*, giving the narratives more personal strength (see Appendix A for further breakdown). I identify three specific narratives used by *Outsports* to make a public moral argument about LGBTQ athletes. These include the Authentic Identity narrative, the Athletic Success narrative, and the Social Acceptance narrative.

### ***Coming Out as an LGBTQ Athlete, or the Authentic Identity Narrative***

Today, *Outsports* plays a large role in helping LGBTQ athletes share their personal narratives, particularly as they open up about their sexuality. *Outsports* shares coming out stories that narrate an “authentic identity,” which is rooted in personal experiences of gender and athleticism. Narratives of Authentic Identity rely on the identity of the athlete and their ability to create an authentic self in a social setting that is constantly policing and disciplining their

identity. These narratives give credence to athletes that “live openly,” show their “true self,” and have “pride” in their own identity. Kyle King (2017) argues that gay male coming out narratives in sport are a particular genre of rhetoric and therefore can be understood in three waves. King argues that we are in the third wave of coming out narratives, which has reintroduced the gay male body publicly. According to King,

Third-wave texts reintroduce the actively out, visible, gay male body becoming aware of his place in history as an opportunity rather than a burden. The bodies of contemporary gay male athletes serve as sex symbols, help activate intersectional arguments, and persuade through more provocative visual modes of address. (pp. 373-374)

This wave is punctuated by the coming out stories of Jason Collins, Robbie Rogers, and Michael Sam, which featured “lengthy, heavily qualified titles” in order to justify their position and increase their novelty as singular figures as openly gay athletes (King, 2017, p. 372). By using King’s analysis as a starting point, I further suggest that it is through narratives such as these that all LGBTQ athletes make compelling arguments for their acceptance in sport. Situated within a genre of coming out narratives, *Outsports* crafts a narrative of Authentic Identity in order to push back against normative assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality in sport. For LGBTQ athletes, these narratives often take the form of coming out statements, which are designed to solidify their identity as both a member of the LGBTQ community and an athlete. As Jen Bacon (1998) argues, without coming out narratives, the very forces that deny their existence would define homosexual individuals. By coming out on their own terms, rather than being “outed” by another, gay individuals make their stories authentic and create a source of agency. At the same time, as Edelman (1994) argues, in these moments of homosexual difference, homosexual

identities are constructed as determinate entities rather than unstable differential relations, and therefore risk falling trap to binary notions of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Several of the most-read articles posted to *Outsports* in 2017 deal with matters of coming out, or were written by athletes who utilized *Outsports.com* as a platform for coming out. The purpose of each of these stories is to show the world that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals are authentic individuals who are not constrained by social constructions of sex and gender. Furthermore, this narrative form articulates good reasons why LGBTQ athletes should not have to hide, particularly when hiding impacts their ability to be an athlete. These stories establish narrative probability and narrative fidelity by relying on personal experiences. By sharing coming out stories that construct a larger narrative of Authentic Identity, *Outsports* gives credence to individual narratives of LGBTQ athletes, which are often left out of mainstream sport media. As King (2017) argues, “Gay...athletes today recognize that they are capable of taking on important roles as key nodes in networks of social change off the field while also using their athletic bodies as focal points for visual persuasion and argument” (p. 384). These efforts often rely on narratives of Authentic Identity to make a public moral argument about LGBTQ identity and participation in sport.

High school football player Austin Hodges narrates his own authentic identity as a football player and member of the drill team. Hodges (2017) writes,

Halftime had just started, and my teammates on the Anahuac High School football team in Anahuac, Texas, headed to the locker room. But I headed to the other side of the field where, still wearing my football uniform, I applied some makeup and got ready to do high kicks and splits with the drill team. (para. 1)



Hodges' narrative goes on to provide justification for his own identity, as both a masculine football player and an eccentric drill team performer. In this way, Hodges' narrative relies on the fluidity of gender to justify his participation in both activities. Hodges (2017) continues,

I like to think that by performing with the drill team, that I opened some minds. I was able to show that not only can gay men play sports but that they can also have, for lack of a better word, a 'flamboyant' side as well and that it was OK that straight men and gay men can have both sides, that it was OK to be different. (para. 6)

The way in which this article narrates identity does so in such a way that makes Hodges' identity persuasive, because this is who he is. There is no denying his identity because his story is both coherent and truthful. Professional wrestler Anthony Bowens makes a similar appeal to authenticity in his own personal narrative. Bowens' narrative follows a similar structure, articulating how his identification as a wrestler and a bisexual man has influenced his identity. Prior to coming out, Bowens felt as if he needed to hide his true self for fear of judgment or backlash, particularly from those in the professional wrestling community. The Authentic Identity narrative provides persuasive reasons for why being true to oneself is important for personal growth. Bowens (2017) writes,

I first entered the pro wrestling world when I was 21...I was living my dream and I should have been the happiest person in the world. The truth is, I wasn't. Externally I was, but deep down I was struggling on the inside with my sexuality. I was afraid to tell the world that I was bisexual. (para. 11)

These narratives remind the audience that sexuality is not something that can be turned on or off, let alone separated from identity. As a black male, Bowens is all too familiar with oppressive structures. Anderson (1998) and Harper (1996) argue that black individuals fail to see the

similarities between black and gay oppression, two things that are very present in our society. For the black and gay athlete, this means double the adversity. Editor in Chief of *MUSED Magazine*, Drew-Shane Daniels (2014), argues that the emotional pressure for black, gay men to come out of the closet is extremely high because of the stereotype that gay men are white. Daniels (2014) states,

The truth about "coming out" stories is that black, gay men need to hear them. We need to see queer people of color celebrating their truths and journeys. These vignettes serve as friendly reminders that this "gay thing" isn't a phase or something exclusive to white Americans. (para. 2)

When this pressure is placed on top of the heteronormative culture of professional sports, the struggle for athletes of color to be accepted becomes even greater. Hoberman (1997) argues that black professional athletes such as basketball and football players are seen as role models within the African American community because they represent success. Essentially, being a good athlete is seen as one of the few means to escape racial oppression.

The Authentic Identity narrative makes persuasive arguments about why LGBTQ athletes should not have to hide who they are. Florida State swimmer Aidan Faminoff (2017) articulates this best in his own narrative stating,

I have known since sixth grade that I was gay. I never felt comfortable enough to talk to anyone about it until I was in college. I was confused as to why I was attracted to men. Throughout middle school and high school, I would keep this to myself. I created a fake persona so I could blend in with the guys. (para. 4)

The hegemonic culture of sport forces LGBTQ athletes to perform gender in socially accepted ways in order to hide their sexuality. Faminoff furthers, "I wanted to scream because I wanted to

talk openly and freely about my attraction to men. I just wanted to let out the feelings and emotions that were building up” (para. 5). The Authentic Identity narrative makes an argument for why this should not be the case, particularly because it is detrimental to the success of the athlete. This is exemplified in Faminoff’s (2017) narrative, which states, “Coming out has made me a better athlete because I am more comfortable and coming into my true self. I am growing into the person I always wanted to be, and this has corresponded with my attitude about diving” (para. 22).

The focus on a “true” or “authentic” identity is a common feature of the coming out narratives shared by *Outsports*, which recognizes how the social constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality influence the lives of athletes. Using this narrative, sex, gender and sexuality become individual ways of identifying, rather than ways of describing or disciplining athletic bodies and performances. This leads to one key fault in the Authentic Identity narrative: the articles rely on binary understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality to describe successful athletes. Athletes are either male or female, depending on the socially constructed category of competition. Even transgender athletes are framed within these binary categories that rely on constructions of sex and gender. Of transgender weightlifter Laurel Hubbard Zeigler (2017d) writes, “Before her transition, Hubbard competed in weightlifting as a man. Now a woman, she wants to continue to compete as her gender” (para. 3). From the beginning of the article, *Outsports* uses the pronoun she, affirming Hubbard’s gender. The article further explains, “Gary Marshall, the president of Olympic Weightlifting New Zealand, said his governing body is simply applying the rules set forth by the IOC. Those rules allow Hubbard to compete as a woman after undergoing certain transitional steps” (Zeigler, 2017d, para. 4). Despite the obvious problems with the statements from Marshall regarding scientific classifications as man or

woman, the use of this statement justifies Hubbard's decision to compete as a woman, because she is a woman. Defining sexuality in relation to sex and gender also normalizes identity categories. In another article about former New England Patriot tight end Aaron Hernandez, Zeigler and Buzinski (2017) aptly state in the title that, "The rush to proclaim Aaron Hernandez 'gay' or 'bisexual' is troubling. Zeigler and Buzinski (2017) write, "Newsflash: Just because a man has sex with another man doesn't make him gay or bisexual. We each get to define what and who we are sexually, even convicted murderers" (para. 17). Examples such as these highlight the ways in which *Outsports* relies on determinate identity categories to make arguments about authentic identity when identity can never be authentic.

The Authentic Identity narrative utilizes the multiple facets of identity that shape individual athletes to make public arguments about LGBTQ athletes. At the same time, however, the Authentic Identity narrative assumes there is such a thing as a "true" or "authentic" identity that can be defined by sex, gender, and/or sexuality. When this narrative structure is used to demonstrate how coming out stories and personal narratives can justify acceptance, they legitimize categories of difference. *Outsports* assumes that by viewing LGBTQ athletes as individuals with their own stories and unique qualities will people accept them as athletes. Aidan Faminoff says it best in the conclusion of his article which reads, "In the end, we are all human beings and deserve to be treated as equals. Yes, I am a human being. Yes, I am gay. Yes, I am proud" (para. 27). As a sport media website, *Outsports* affirms LGBTQ athletes as individuals worthy of our attention, while also justifying homosexual difference.

### ***Athletic Success Narrative***

Without competition many could argue that sport could not or would not exist. One critical argument often made about LGBTQ athletes is that their sexuality functions as a

distraction, making them unsuccessful in sport. Consequently, sexuality becomes a means of constructing and explaining difference tied to sport success. Following the coming out of Michael Sam, sports journalists were quick to proclaim that his presence in the locker room was a distraction to other players. Following his release from the St. Louis Rams, many wondered if his sexuality was used to downplay his athletic success (Trainer, 2015). As a sport media site, *Outsports* has the potential to disrupt normative assumptions about athletic success by establishing success as a fixed construct that cannot be altered by sexuality. By furthering the notion that LGBTQ athletes can be just as successful as their cis-gender, heterosexual counterparts, *Outsports* crafts a narrative of Athletic Success to position LGBTQ athletes as the heroes of their own sports drama. Athletic Success narratives rely on athletes who demonstrate success through athletic feats, overcome obstacles, or find fame and glory in sport. In doing so, narratives of Athletic Success articulate personal stories of success as an argument for acceptance that trump identity categories.

Narratives of Athletic Success are predicated on a coherent drama where an LGBTQ athlete becomes the hero. These narratives use language such as “accomplished,” “successful,” “champion,” and “winning” to justify moments of success from LGBTQ athletes. Narrating the history of known gay players in the NFL, Buzinski (2017a) writes, “[Jerry] Smith is the most accomplished player on the list. He was a two-time Pro Bowl selection, was named one of the 80 greatest Redskins and is included in the team’s Ring of Fame” (para. 5). One of the few known out professional football players, Jerry Smith played from 1965-77 before complications with AIDS took his life. Fans of sport understand the logic of success, particularly when it is framed as an accomplishment. Another article is aptly titled, “World Champion and Olympian Shawn Barber Comes Out As ‘Gay and Proud’” (Zeigler, 2017f). The narrative begins by stating,

“Olympic pole vaulter and world champion Shawn Barber came out publicly as gay earlier today” (para. 1). Positioning LGBTQ athletes as heroes and champions is critical to constructing a strong public argument the future of LGBTQ athletes in sport. If *Outsports* can provide examples and evidence of successful LGTQ athletes now, then surely they can be successful in the future. Other narratives, such as those of college football linebacker Kyle Kurdziolek, take longer to develop the drama and narrate success (Hall, 2017a). Kurdziolek’s narrative begins setting up his love life and a secret no one else knew. Using the elements of drama, Hall (2017a) narrates Kurdziolek’s success not just in terms of athletic feats, but in having the courage to open up about his sexuality. When this courage is juxtaposed next to a successful football career, it is viewed as a positive trait; one to be admired. Not only did Kurdziolek have the courage to come out, but also ended his 2016 season with 45 tackles, playing all 11 regular season games (Hall, 2017a). Narratives of Athletic Success make strong public arguments about LGBTQ athletes because success, unlike matters of sex, gender, and sexuality, is easy to understand in a world that celebrates success in every occasion.

Of the 25 most-read stories of 2017, only two featured narratives of women or female athletes, and both relied on the Athletic Success narrative. The first was an article about Laurel Hubbard, a transgender weightlifter, who earned an international title in the over 90-kg division at the Australian International, while also setting a national record in both the snatch and clean and jerk (Zeigler, 2017d). This article serves an important purpose, in that it narrates the success of a female athlete, particularly one who identifies as transgender. The second featured the story of NFL assistant coach Katie Sowers, who became the first ‘out’ LGBTQ coach in the NFL (Buzinski, 2017b). Unlike other articles in the top 25, the article about Sowers was significantly longer and featured an email exchange between Sowers and co-founder Jim Buzinski. The length

and the format of the article allowed *Outsports* to craft an undeniable narrative articulating Sowers' success and her credentials as a coach in the NFL. Buzinski (2017b) writes, "The 49ers did not hire Sowers, 31, to be an offensive assistant working with the wide receivers because she is a woman or gay. They hired her because of her football background and to help make them a better team" (para. 5). Importantly, the official website for the NFL (NFL.com) picked up the story from *Outsports*, as did *ESPN*, *CBS*, and the *Washington Post*. Each time the article was picked up by mainstream sport media, the narrative of credibility and success was maintained. Both of these articles represent a unique problem faced by LGBTQ athletes: can their narratives disrupt hegemonic discourse only if they are successful athletes? Many of the narratives posted to *Outsports* such as these were picked up by mainstream sources; however, they all shared one thing in common: the athletes featured in their stories were *successful* athletes. Therefore, success becomes a way of circumventing arguments that rely on sex, gender, or sexuality, making success a prerequisite for a place on the website.

By serving as a model for mainstream sport media, *Outsports* inserts stories about LGBTQ athletes finding success into a culture that deems LGBTQ identity as the failure. In doing so, *Outsports* normalizes binary assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality in sport and privileges those narratives that are easily accepted in the sport community. In the introduction to this dissertation, I used the story of Mack Beggs to introduce the idea of queer sports. It is no coincidence that Beggs' story was the second most read article of 2017. Beggs is a very successful and accomplished wrestler in the state of Texas and his competition in the women's division earned him national attention. Unfortunately, narratives of winning and success are a double-edged sword. On one hand, these narratives challenge current social thought about what a successful athlete looks and acts like. On the other hand, this rhetorical strategy privileges only

those LGBTQ athletes that are successful. The example of Beggs is a much-needed moment of queer visibility in sport media. However, as a transgender man (who looks, wrestles, and performs masculinity very well) Beggs becomes the ideal for transgender athletes. Using the narrative of Beggs, it is easy to argue that he should be competing as a male wrestler in the men's division, rather than as a woman in the women's division as the state of Texas forced him to do. Instead of viewing Beggs as an unstable differential relation with the potential to disrupt gendered categories, Beggs passes as a successful male athlete. Therefore, we must grapple with the tension between narrating success and privileging successful performances of gendered athleticism.

### ***Social Acceptance Narrative***

The previously mentioned article about Mack Beggs is an ideal place to begin a discussion of social acceptance because of the public response to transgender athletes in particular. The article, written by *Outsports* co-founder Cyd Zeigler (2017b), features a large image of Beggs at the top of the page. Beggs is posing in his wrestling singlet, with his arms crossed, showing off well-defined muscles. The veins in his arms are bulging, his chest is muscular, and his hair is styled in a classic just-woke-up look. There is even the start of a small mustache above his upper lip. Everything about Beggs is the epitome of a high school *male* wrestler. The article reflects this, asking the reader, "When you look at the picture above of Mack Beggs, what do you see?" (para. 1). Zeigler responds, "I know what I see. A wrestler. An athlete. A champion. A boy" (para. 2). Narratives such as this rely on public moral arguments about social acceptance and passing. Passing is often used as a term to represent LGBTQ individuals who can "pass" as straight. This narrative form relies on characters that are likable or relatable, who embody the essence of sport, and who find acceptance in sport. In a strategic



rhetorical move, these narratives use stories of athletes who are already socially accepted by their families, friends, teammates, and even communities to make an argument for social acceptance. This narrative utilizes the strength of narrative fidelity to articulate an idea that is already happening.

Articles that utilize the Social Acceptance narrative frame success in terms of acceptance, positivity, and love, while further entrenching binary understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality in sport. In the fourth most-read story the headline reads, “Kansas State OT Scott Frantz Has Had ‘Nothing But Positivity’ Since Coming Out As Gay” (Zeigler, 2017j). Frantz told Zeigler (2017j) in his interview with *Outsports*,

You just have to help out people whenever you can, that’s what life’s all about... You can’t go through it alone and if I can reach out to even just one person and help them not hate themselves, people who feel hopeless, if I can reach one person and potentially save their life, that’s all that matters. That’s all I wanted to do. (para. 5)

Story number eight reads, “This Gay College Football Player Found Total Team Acceptance From Day One” (Pertuset, 2017). Narrating his own story (ranked ninth in the *Outsports* list), Brad Neuman (2017) titles his article, “This Gay Minnesota Sprinter Found Himself, and Love, in the Big Ten.” The love he found was fellow runner, Justin Rabon, who also shared his coming out narrative to *Outsports* (Rabon, 2017) and was featured with Neuman in an article about their relationship (Zeigler, 2017h). All of these passages articulate the ability to accept socially constructed identity categories and do little to actually challenge or deconstruct binary assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality.

In the previously mentioned article about Kansas State football player, Scott Frantz argued that as more athletes come out stories such as his would be “pretty run-of-the-mill. Give

it another four years and it might not be anything... The culture is definitely changing” (Zeigler, 2017j, paras. 6-7). Another article tells the story of the bond between successful Michigan football coach, Jim Harbaugh, and his openly gay son, James (Zeigler, 2017l). According to *Outsports*, Harbaugh is the second prominent college football coach to have a son come out as gay (2017l). A student at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance, James is “the self-proclaimed biggest fan in Michigan Stadium” (para. 5). As a prominent name in college football, and sport media in particular, the Harbaugh story narrates LGBTQ visibility and challenges misconceptions that “gays don’t like sports.”

Negativity is a clear side effect of social change, particularly when LGBTQ identities are involved. However, how these events and stories are handled is important for shaping rhetorical discourse about LGBTQ athletes, particularly when narrating social acceptance. One article focused on the failed apology of NHL star Ryan Getzlaf following the use of a gay slur during an NHL game. As Zeigler (2017g) argues, this “non-apology” is one of the worst in sports history and the NHL did little about it. Zeigler (2017g) drew five conclusions from this non-apology and I cite them all because of their importance to disrupting hegemonic discourses:

1. Don’t get caught. The language is fine, but as long as no one hears it and no one can read your lips, no problem.
2. If you do get caught, no need to apologize. Just blame other people and throw around the word “responsibility” a couple times. You’ll be fine.
3. As long as you didn’t mean it that way, you can just blame the media for labeling the gay slur a gay slur, and you’re off the hook.
4. Make sure you say you won’t say it again, but don’t really worry about it. Just make sure no cameras are around when you do.

5. Be nice on the call from the NHL and tell them you didn't realize what you said was a slur. They won't suspend you. (para. 12)

These conclusions reveal two things about sport culture. First, they demonstrate the commitment to upholding the hegemonic culture, particularly through the use of media. Beyond *Outsports*, few media stations condemned Getzlaff for the use of the gay slur. Second, these conclusions reflect the need for an examination of narratives such as this that disrupt discourses of hegemony and homophobia.

Combating potential homophobia is also imperative for queer sport media, particularly in finding strategies to disrupt discourses that attempt to resist challenges to binary understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. Narratives of social acceptance are one way of challenging such discourse. In November of 2017, *CBS* aired an NFL matchup between the New England Patriots and the Oakland Raiders hosted at a neutral location in Mexico. Prior to the match, *Outsports* wrote, “*CBS* has a very important decision to make about its broadcast...Fans in Mexico, where the game will be played, will chant gay slurs” (Zeigler, 2017m). During the previous season's match in this location, *ESPN* failed to address the use of the gay slur, despite being well documented by the international soccer organization, FIFA. Working with GLAAD, an LGBTQ media advocacy organization, *Outsports* made *CBS* aware of the chant prior to the match. In the article that made the top 25, *Outsports* noted that, “*CBS* used crowd noise to mask the chanting of [the] gay slur...and did a really good job of making [it]” (Zeigler, 2017m, para. 1). By calling attention to potential problems with broadcast, *Outsports* used the narrative of Social Acceptance to prevent the slur from being heard. Another article written by *Outsports* writer Erik Hall (2017b) narrates Hall's trip to the St. Louis Cardinal's Christian Day after the media website was denied credentials (2017b). According to co-founder Jim Buzinski, this marks the first time in

the 17-year history of *Outsports* that they were denied media credentials. Hall noted, “ While the Cardinals denied a credential to an LGBT publication, Cardinals Manager Mike Matheny tried to claim Christians are an afflicted minority during his Christian Day talk” (para. 11). Matheny stated, “For [his players] to share something that isn’t politically correct anymore, something that isn’t publicly acceptable, for them to stand up here and to share...takes a great amount of courage” (Hall, 2017b, para. 12). Matheny’s statements are indicative of discourse that is attempting to protect dominant discourses of sport that rely on normative assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality. When the St. Louis Cardinals denied *Outsports* a press pass, but allowed Matheny to claim Christians are a marginalized group they reinforced dominant narratives of who should be accepted in sport. By narrating his own story, Hall uses *Outsports* to call attention to places in sport that are still resistant to the LGBTQ community.

### **Evaluating the Use of Narratives in Queering Sport**

As a sport media website, *Outsports* uses narratives to create a public moral argument about the acceptance of LGBTQ athletes and the need for more media coverage. For visitors to the website, *Outsports* is a place that narrates and reaffirms their own identity and beliefs, constituting a homonormative view of sports. The strength in the narrative probability and narrative fidelity rely on the fact that visitors to *Outsports* already support the truth in the narratives. Although *Outsports* attempts to challenge binary assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality in sport, the narratives utilized in the top 25 articles do little to actually challenge these structures. *Outsports* is supposed to work on the margin of sport to disrupt hegemonic discourses for LGBTQ athletes, fans, and consumers. However, because *Outsports* exists as its own unique space with a specific viewership, it fails to utilize the queer potential created by unstable differential relations in identity. More specifically, the narratives used by *Outsports* reaffirm

difference in order make an argument about acceptance instead of using difference to disrupt discourse. Therefore, I make two key arguments. First, I argue that the narratives created by *Outsports* risk normalizing LGBTQ identities by packaging them in ways that are easily accepted and non-threatening. Second, I argue the queer potential of *Outsports* can be realized when mainstream media and journalism outlets repost stories written by *Outsports*, which implicate media outlets in their own hegemonic practices.

First, relying on dominant narratives does have its risks (Lewis, 1987) and *Outsports* relies on their own dominant narrative of inclusion. As an already queer space, visitors to *Outsports* are already in agreement about LGBTQ inclusion in sport. The use of personal narratives to make public arguments risks giving in to what Michael Warner (1998) calls the “good gay” (p. 113). King (2017) explains,

Rather than pursuing the spatial and institutional transformation of sports—using sports to dismantle all hierarchies and to create a more capacious world—most gay male athlete coming out narratives settle on more liberal, assimilationist goals—such as gay marriage, workplace legislation, and anti-bullying campaigns—through a modality of inclusion. (p. 388)

Thus, these narratives must avoid the potential to be seen as “non-threatening” or else any queer potential is lost. Two of the articles that utilized coming out narratives were written by athletes who wished to share their story using *Outsports*. The first was Justin Rabon, a runner at the University of Minnesota, and the second was Anthony Bowens, a professional wrestler. Rabon (2017) wrote in his own personal article,

The best decision I think I’ve made was transferring schools and truly deciding to stay

true to my character as a person while being here. In being myself, I have made the most genuine friends, made the greatest memories, and found myself in the process. (para. 24)

Authentic Identity narratives such as this one articulate the potential for LGBTQ athletes to be happy and successful, despite alternative narratives that exist to silence or marginalize their identity. Featured in three articles (two with his boyfriend), Rabon's story has queer potential in spaces such as *Outsports*, but is the narrative radical enough to disrupt a dominant narrative maintained for decades by the guardians of sport culture? The strength of the Authentic Identity and Athletic Success narratives are so strong that they become the ideal to which LGBTQ athletes must live up to. In his narrative about coming out while working as a professional wrestler, Anthony Bowens (2017) writes,

I had three reasons for coming out: First, I felt it was finally the right time for me. Second, I ask [my boyfriend] to be in my life and the fact that I asked him to censor a part of his life because of me hiding was nonsense... The final reason goes back to the way I started this article. I wanted to make a difference in people's lives. I realized I have a unique platform to spread awareness about ongoing issues in the world, to break stereotypes and show everyone that they can be themselves and do whatever they put their minds to no matter what their sexuality is. (paras. 25-28)

As Bowens explains, narratives make a powerful argument for acceptance because they rely personal experiences to make logical arguments that are hard to deny, exemplifying Fisher's (1984) "good reason." Furthermore, narratives function as a way to create change, something that is much needed in sport culture. In fact, the use of narratives is important for LGBTQ athletes because they inspire others to come out by sharing their own stories. Many of the coming out stories articulated the decision to come out after meeting or hearing about another

LGBTQ athlete like themselves. However, even when these narratives move beyond *Outsports*, they are viewed as non-threatening to the hegemonic culture. If these athletes can find success in the current system, why should it change? Positioned in the context of the website, these narratives can be seen as token examples of successful LGBTQ athletes, giving in to Warner's notion of the "good gay." These narratives simply package athletes in ways that are non-threatening and easily disseminated to an audience that is committed to maintaining binary assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality.

And yet, when coming out narratives written by and posted to *Outsports* disseminate into mainstream media they have the potential to disrupt sport media by implicating these news outlets in their own hegemonic practices. In June of 2017, former NFL tackle Ryan O'Callaghan opened up about his sexuality in an emotional interview with Cyd Zeigler, which quickly became the most read article of 2017 and was shared on other media platforms such as *Sports Illustrated* (Kay, 2017) and *NPR* (Goldman, 2017). O'Callaghan came out six years after leaving the NFL, having played with the New England Patriots and the Kansas City Chiefs, two prominent NFL teams. In the article, O'Callaghan opens up about his personal struggle with his sexuality, revealing how the toxic hegemonic culture almost lead to his death following battles with drugs and depression. As Zeigler (2017i) explains, "Ryan O'Callaghan's plan was always to play football and then, when his career was over, kill himself." The way the article is framed draws on the personal experiences of O'Callaghan as a successful football player (Athletic Success narrative), while also appealing to the pathos of athletes in similar situations, letting them know they are not alone. Furthermore, the narrative draws attention to the toxic culture that marginalizes LGBTQ identities. As O'Callaghan stated, "No one is going to assume the big football player is gay...It's why a football team is such a good place to hide" (2017i, para. 11), a

line that was also picked up by *Sports Illustrated* (Kay, 2017). Ironically, as part of the mainstream media, *Sports Illustrated* fails to see the ways in which their organization is implicated in this statement. In one poignant part of the narrative O'Callaghan told Zeigler (2017i),

People need to understand that we are everywhere. We're your sons, your daughters, your teammates, your neighbors. And honestly, even some of your husbands and wives. You just don't know it yet. It's not always easy being honest, but I can tell you it's much easier and more enjoyable being yourself and not living a lie. (paras. 117-118)

This passage accomplishes two things. First, it makes a public argument about LGBTQ athletes and the way they treated by media within the sport culture. LGBTQ athletes are not limited to one sport or even one gender. They are out there and they can be successful. O'Callaghan's narrative serves as a reminder of what happens when sport media reifies the heteronormative and hegemonic culture of sport. Second, this passage speaks to ideas of authenticity and personal truth that make public arguments about identity. Zeigler and O'Callagan are calling for more athletes to speak their truths and share their stories. When narratives like this are disseminated from a website like *Outsports* to larger sport media outlets, the narratives become accepted as truth.

Coming out narratives and stories of successful LGBTQ athletes are often published by *Outsports* and then picked up by mainstream sport media. For example, one coming out narrative features a high school wrestler from Illinois and was picked up by outlets such as the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times*, and *Elite Daily News*. This article, titled "This Elite Illinois High School Wrestler is Proudly Gay," not only positions Dylan Geick as the hero of his own story (Athletic Success narrative), but also uses his personal story to articulate his individuality



(Authentic Identity narrative). Articles such as this rely on these carefully constructed narratives to facilitate a queer sport space for LGBTQ athletes, while also disrupting the dominant narrative of mainstream media, even briefly. It is in these moments of resistance that these narratives poke holes in the dominant narrative of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. Furthermore, many of the articles were accompanied by a visual image that positioned the (generally) male athlete in an unmistakably masculine and athletic pose. In the conclusion of his essay on gay male athlete coming out narratives, Kyle King argues for the importance of visibility such as this. Using the kiss between NFL draft prospect Michael Sam and his then boyfriend, King (2017) argues,

Men's professional sports has long been such a purposefully constructed space. From the artificial dark, then, in which gay male athletes had for too long been forced to reside, the kiss emerged and shone light upon a longer history of gay men in sports. In this moment of joy, when Sam's trajectory was still uncharted, other worlds were possible. (p. 388)

I argue that the combination of narrative and visual serves to further support the strength of the narrative by making a visual appeal to athletic ability, while also challenging assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality in sport. When large, strong men like O'Callaghan, or well-defined wrestlers like Dylan Geick are used as models of athletic ability, *Outsports* simultaneously normalizes their bodies and disrupts hegemonic discourses. As bodies that conform to the ideal masculine athlete, *Outsports* separates athletic ability from sexual orientation, queering the relationship between gender, sexuality, and athleticism.

## **Conclusion**

*Outsports* has the potential to disrupt the hegemonic nature of sport by crafting narratives that queer assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality in sport. Rather than relying specifically on

dominant narratives of hegemony and heteronormativity, *Outsports* calls attention to LGBTQ athletes and narrates arguments of identity, success, and acceptance. The rhetorical vision created by the sport-media complex has maintained a culture of hegemony that privileges masculine performances of athleticism by narrating stories of successful athletes. *Outsports* relies on narratives of success and personal drama in order to queer mainstream sport media. The way in which *Outsports* crafts narratives of Authentic Identity, Athletic Success, and Social Acceptance use personal stories to make logical arguments about LGBTQ participation in sport. In doing so, *Outsports* is queering the relationship between gender, sexuality, and athleticism, ultimately disrupting assumptions about gender and athleticism. However, in doing so, *Outsports* risks crafting the image of “token” LGBTQ athletes – athletes who are undeniably successful at what they do. Still, it is important to look for moments where *Outsports* productively queers sport by providing good reasons for accepting LGBTQ athletes. In one narrative, *Outsports* describes how baseball player Ryan Santana felt comfortable enough to come out on live television as part of TLC’s *This is Life Live* series (Zeigler, 2017e). As an American baseball player living in Australia, Santana is finding success in his own way. The culture is changing, even if that change is taking place on the margins.

One key issue that has yet to be considered in this case study is the lack of attention given to LGBTQ women in *Outsports* top 25 articles. Of the 25 articles that made the list, only two featured narratives of women. Historically, female athletes have been more open about their sexuality than their male counterparts. However, *Outsports* still caters to the male identity, marginalizing female voices. In doing so, *Outsports* falls victim to the same discourses it pushes back against. For example, the website relies on the visual aspects of sports, particularly when it comes to bodies. Buzinski and Zeigler (2007) recognize this as the “eye-candy factor” (p. 8).

They state, “For gay guys, watching sports played by men puts the eye candy on display front and center” (p. 8). In the same way that mainstream sport media relies on sexualized images of women to increase viewership, *Outsports* relies on the sexualized male body. Furthermore, the website as a whole is crafted for a specific market, mainly white, affluent, gay men. When *Vox Media* acquired *Outsports* in 2013, then VP of *SB Nation*’s editorial board Kevin Lockland stated, “We look to target young, male, affluent influencers and the *Outsports* audience fit that profile really well” (Raphael, 2013, para. 3). While others certainly visit and view the website, it is important to problematize the type of athletes that are portrayed on the site and those that it caters to. If an inclusive sport media space privileges one sex/gender over the other, can it really be queer at all?

Although *Outsports* is not as radical and disruptive as one would hope, the journalistic practices of the media outlet create strong narratives of acceptance, which are important for LGBTQ acceptance. As I have argued, the online space created by *Outsports* works on the margins to challenge binary assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality in sport. However, these narratives risk normalizing identities that rely on social constructions of sex and gender. The queer potential of *Outsports* can only be realized when these identities are viewed as unstable differential relations, rather than fixed constructs.

CHAPTER III

CONSTRUCTING AN INCLUSIVE SPORT:  
CHALLENGING GENDER IN THE SPORT OF QUIDDITCH

**Introduction**

It was a cold and rainy morning as the community league players walked on to the pitch for the first game of the morning. Grabbing their brooms from the officials, six players from each team lined up in front of the three goal hoops on their respective ends of the pitch. Despite the cold and the rain, teams from all over the American Southwest gathered to watch the opening match. From my position in the stands, I listened as the music played over the loud speakers to pump up the crowd. A man in a shark costume dances along to the music, drawing the attention of a player dressed as the infamous golden snitch, holding a “free hugs” sign. They briefly dance together before our attention is drawn back to the field with a sharp whistle. “Brooms up!” shouts the head referee. On the field, the twelve players dig their cleats in to the turf and stare out at the four balls lining the middle of the field. The ball that resembles a deflated volleyball is known as the quaffle and is key to scoring. The other three balls, semi-deflated kick balls, function as bludgers and can knock opposing players out of the game. At the whistle, they race for the balls, trying to beat the opposing team for possession of the quaffle and three bludgers. Players from both teams dive for the balls, but a man on the home team comes up with the quaffle. He races down the field passing to his fellow chasers, a male and female, who work to avoid the flying bludgers. Together, the three chasers physically battle closer to the three goal hoops. Before the home team can score, the chaser with the quaffle is hit with a bludger, the quaffle falls to the ground, and a chaser from the opposing team takes control. In the stands

behind me, a young boy wearing a Gryffindor scarf asks his father why the quidditch players are not flying like in *Harry Potter*. Despite the lack of flying brooms and enchanted balls, the players in front of me are unmistakably playing the fictitious sport created by J.K. Rowling in her best-selling series *Harry Potter*.

Muggle (non-magical) quidditch, which is played on the ground, rather than in the air on magical brooms, is a quickly growing sport around the world, particularly in the United States. Derived from the writings of J.K. Rowling, muggle quidditch attempts to embrace a world of gender equality in an athletic context. Mike Elder (2014), a writer for *Sports World News* notes that quidditch is one of the fastest growing sports among college athletes. Founded in 2005 at Middlebury College in Vermont, the sport of quidditch has grown to include more than 110 teams registered with US Quidditch Association (USQA), the governing organization in the United States (Davis, 2017). According the USQA website, “USQ advances the sport by organizing events and programs that build community and empower all genders to compete together” (“About US Quidditch,” n.d., para. 1). As an organization, the USQ unites players through competitive events that culminate in the US Quidditch Cup. The 2017 US Quidditch Cup hosted in Kissimmee, Florida featured 60 teams from over 20 states (“Gameplay information,” 2017). The 2018 Cup is expected to grow even more, bringing teams from across the country to Round Rock, Texas. In addition to the collegiate league, players have come together to create a Major League Quidditch organization (Davis, 2017). Despite the growing popularity of the sport, quidditch remains true to the gender inclusive nature of the game created by Rowling and brought to life by Xander Manshel and his friends at Middlebury College (“History of US Quidditch,” n.d.).

Current research on Q/quidditch is focused on the text of J.K. Rowling (Segrave, 2016) or qualitative data obtained from participant interviews (Cohen, Melton, & Peachy, 2014; Cohen & Peachy, 2015; Segrave, 2016). While this research is invaluable in terms of participant experience, more research is needed on how specific iterations of sport challenge binary assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality, which often separate men from women. The sport of quidditch is a rich rhetorical artifact because it attempts to circumvent the binary model of sport by adopting a sport rooted in fiction that has yet to be dominated by hegemonic sex/gender structures. In doing so, quidditch allows athletes to perform gender and athleticism under the framework of inclusion rather than in a setting driven by sex/gender separation. The sport of quidditch differs from other leagues that combine sex and gender categories because it comes from a fictional world that has yet to allow gender influence sport. This difference in context matters because those who come to the sport are not guided by social structures that tie athleticism to gender, but instead, rely on unstable performances of gender. Put another way, the sport of quidditch has yet to become entrenched in discourses that normalize sex, gender, and sexuality in sport.

The commitment to a gender inclusive organization makes the sport of quidditch an ideal place to interrogate the relationship between gender and sport and has attracted the attention of scholars interested in gender inclusivity in sport (Cohen, Melton, & Peachy, 2014; Cohen & Peachy, 2015; Rigda, 2016) and the potential to disrupt the gendered nature of sport (Segrave, 2016). In order to distinguish between the magical and non-magical versions of the sport, I turn to the edited volume by Lisa S. Brenner (2015). As Brenner articulates, references to Rowling's magical version of the sport will be represented by a capitalized version of "Quidditch." This also applies to any terms related to the magical version (e.g. Seeker). The muggle, or non-

magical version, will be represented by the use of the lowercase “quidditch,” or related terms (e.g. quaffle). The purpose of this chapter is to engage with the ways in which gender performances in quidditch both challenge and reinforce binary assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality in sport. Segrave (2016) argues that, “quidditch, in both its fictive and real forms, offers a powerful alternative to the biocentric gender model of contemporary sport and suggests a gender paradigm that empowers athletes and furthers the cause of gender equity in sport” (p. 1300). Laying the groundwork for analyzing the sport of quidditch, Segrave (2016) adopted a multidisciplinary and multimethodological approach to interrogate gender equality in the sport. Part of this study included interviews of current quidditch players to better understand how the sport of quidditch “proactively rejects the gender binary by acknowledging the multiplicity of genders that constitute the lived experience of many athletes” (p. 1302). Segrave argues that muggle quidditch “offers a progressive environment that seeks to eradicate the constraining heteronormative limitations imposed by the dominant gender binary” (p. 1312). Drawing on work from Coakley (2015), Segrave (2016) states, “[Rowling’s] portrait of quidditch champions the capacity of the imagination to envision a world in which human bodies can experience a sport at the school and international level irrespective of gender or sexual orientation” (p. 1311). However, despite the noble intentions of the sport, there are numerous ways in which quidditch reifies gender. For example, women play significantly less frequently than men and often face scrutiny for the gender-maximum rule (Rigda, 2016). Following the work of Segrave (2016), I further explore the queer potential of the sport of quidditch by examining ways in which it destabilizes binary notions of sex, gender, and sexuality. Through the use of rhetorical field methods, I take up individual performances of sex, gender, and sexuality in quidditch as unstable differential relations. Viewing these performances as unstable differential relations is important

because it is through instability that queer potential is mobilized. Specifically, I argue that the queer potential of quidditch has yet to be realized because binary assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality drive rules, norms, and athletic performances within the sport. Although quidditch has the potential to destabilize the gender binary of sport by creating a queer performance space and through embodied performances of gender and athleticism, the power of the binary model limits this potential. In this chapter, I begin by situating the study of quidditch within the tradition of rhetorical field methods. Next, I explore the sport of Quidditch articulated by J.K. Rowling and its transformation into its non-magical cousin. Finally, I examine the ways in which the sport of quidditch both conforms to and disrupts the gender binary that sport is predicated on.

### **Rhetorical Field Methods in Sport**

Studying the sport of quidditch is restricted for rhetorical scholars because of the absence of what one might think of as a rhetorical text. As a sport, quidditch is still growing, which means it does not receive national news coverage and athletes do not appear on ESPN or other sport media sites. One way to engage with the queer potential of quidditch is through the use of rhetorical field methods. In a sport such as quidditch, the text is constantly changing as athletes construct their identity through lived experiences. In their germinal work on rhetorical field methods Sara L. McKinnon, Robert Asen, Karma R. Chávez, and Robert Glenn Howard (2016) argue that rhetorical field methods offers scholars an opportunity to approach texts in new ways. They explain, “Field methods allows us greater opportunities for talking about and articulating these unique methodological processes, to make them discernable to our reading audiences” (p. 3). Field methods “enhance, clarify, or widen our understandings of rhetorical criticism” (p. 3) by allowing rhetorical critics to engage with texts in new ways. By engaging in field methods, rhetoricians are invited “to attend to the way discourse moves, articulates, and shapes the



material realities of people's lives in the everyday, in the public, and in their communities" (p.

4). As a methodology, rhetorical field methods are a means for rhetoricians to move to the field and engage with inaccessible texts and vernacular discourses.

Rhetorical field methods are predicated on the existence of and engagement with the *field*, which helps to produce the rhetorical text. The field, as defined by McKinnon et al, is "the nexus where rhetoric is produced, where it is enacted, where it circulates, and is audienced" (p.

4). Senda-Cook, Middleton, and Endres (2016) contend that the field is not simply a place where one goes to do research, but rather that it is "a rhetorical place that contributes to and limits conditions of possibility for rhetorical practice, performance, and intervention" (p. 23).

Recognizing the troubled past the concept of the field invokes, McKinnon et al. argue that a renewed focus on the field "helps attune researchers' focus to the power relations that are always part and parcel of doing research" (p. 4). For rhetorical scholars, the field is a place to engage with people, places, and material cultures that exist as living texts. In doing so, rhetorical scholars can better reflect on the way in which rhetoric emerges and is mobilized by individuals and groups.

Taking up rhetorical field methods as a critical methodology certainly brings about questions of methodology and ethics. For rhetorical scholars interested in field methods, the tools used for data collection may include field notes, reflections, transcripts, or other documents that help to shed light on meaning construction. Because the text is not static and not all texts can be approached in the same way, the rhetorical critic must choose the best possible way to analyze the text. According to McKinnon et al. (2016), "Field methods may include interview, focus groups, observation, personal narrative, ethnography, autoethnography, oral history interviews, performance, thematic analysis, iterative analysis, grounded theory, and many other forms of

data collection and analysis” (p. 5). Doing research that necessitates a move to the field is predicated upon the research questions being asked. For example, in their analysis of a public dinner event in Omaha, Nebraska, Senda-Cook, Middleton, and Endres (2016) contend that moving to the field is important because it emphasizes the rhetoricity of place. In this way, the field is not simply a context or backdrop, but a space “that participates in and cocreates the rhetoric of its inhabitants” (p. 23). However, thinking of the field in this way is sure to bring up a variety of methodological questions about the field and the interaction between the field and the rhetorical scholar interested in it. These methodological questions include text, context, audience, judgment, and ethics. These *topoi* help to ease questions about the process of field methods and the researcher’s engagement with the text and field.

The text is a set of diverse, but complexly interrelated documents put together by the rhetorical critic; including but not limited to video, photographs, performances, transcripts of interviews or focus groups, etc. Taken together, these documents are used by the critic to create the text for analysis. Rhetorical scholars have long defined texts in ways that fit their unique scholarly interests. This engagement with new and creative texts has been productive for the field of rhetorical criticism. As McGee (1990) argued, texts have largely disappeared and it is the job of the rhetorical critic to construct the text from a series of fragments. By expanding the notion of text through rhetorical field methods, the critic is able to engage with texts that are often inaccessible, but important for understanding identity and meaning making in a specific community or group. McKinnon et al. argues that, “Understanding texts as discursive practices allows the critic to examine bodies, embodied performances, and feeling/affect as material worthy of rhetorical analysis” (p. 8). Viewing the text in this way removes the focus from a text-centered approach and privileges what Conquergood (2002) contends are the often-ignored

modalities of knowing: “intonation, silence, body tension, arched eyebrows, blank stares, and other protective arts of disguise and secrecy” (p. 146). Rhetorical field methods not only expands what counts as a rhetorical text, but also offers new perspectives on what counts as rhetorical discourse.

Context includes, “‘the particulars of the case – the local circumstances that frame and motivate’ the rhetorical performance” (Leff, 1986, p. 382 cited in McKinnon et al, 2016, p. 9). Rhetorical scholars have long engaged with issues of context, particularly in how they emphasize the relationship between text and context. How a critic engages with the beginning and ending of a text is determined by their interpretation of the text, often stemming from the access to secondary sources. Field methods expands the options rhetorical critics have to contextualize the text in front of them by allowing for a more nuanced view of the particulars of any situation. The engagement with secondary sources allows rhetorical scholars to re-create the rhetorical situation for a given rhetorical act. However, field methods allow for more reflection on and about the re-creation of context, and avoid what Carole Blair (2001) calls the “metaphorical ‘flattening’ of experience” (p. 275). Following the work of Blair (2001), McKinnon et al. (2016) contend that, “Field methods facilitate an embodied presence for experiencing text and context” (p. 10), which draws upon the lived experiences of rhetorical discourse. Furthermore, McKinnon et al. explain, “[F]ield methods allow critics to engage a social group systematically over an extended period of time” (p. 10). In doing so, the critic may examine the broader characteristics of a context, which sheds light on rhetorical practices enabled and disabled over time.

Audience refers to the participants in the processes of meaning-making. According to McKinnon et al. (2016), “field methods may bolster rhetorical understanding of audiences as active participants in processes of meaning-making” (p. 12). In rhetorical criticism, the audience

has been historically treated as a static subject that is capable of being influenced by discourse. This is most evident in Lloyd Bitzer's (1968) rhetorical situation, which views the audience as one element of the rhetorical situation. Viewing the audience as active participants, rather than static objects of persuasion, allows the critic to better understand the relationship between the rhetor and audience. Specifically, this view positions the rhetor and audience as collaborators in meaning-making. Drawing on work from media studies (ex. Hall, 1999), McKinnon et al. argue that engaging with the audience through field methods expands the realm of rhetorical discourse. Much like rhetoric is concerned with all available means of persuasion, so too should rhetorical scholars be concerned with any available discourse. It is through the interaction of rhetor and audience that meaning-making takes place. As McKinnon et al. conclude, "[R]hetoric exerts a constitutive force that helps shape people's understandings of their environments and identity" (p. 13). It is up to rhetorical scholars to expand the boundaries of audience and the role it plays in constructing rhetorical discourse.

Judgment refers to the agency of the critic to evaluate and engage with a text. Judgment, according to McKinnon et al., is a methodological consideration that "seeks to find a balance between the critic's agency in making judgments about texts and the critic's responsibility to the human beings making those texts" (p. 15). As rhetorical critics, we determine what texts to examine and the best way to interpret them. This places a responsibility on the shoulders of the rhetorical critic to represent not only the text, but the voices represented by the text. Rhetorical scholarship has long dealt with issues of judgment, particularly in how rhetorical critics approach texts. By turning to rhetorical field methods, the rhetorical critic is more actively engaged with a variety of texts. While there is a risk to being this close to a particular text, especially when that text involves marginalized voices, rhetorical field methods allows "rhetorical critics to more

actively engage in self- reflexivity, what Morris (2010) has called a ‘critical self-portraiture’” (p. 17). Drawing on work from performance studies, Morris (2010) and McKinnon et al. (2016) argue that this turn to self-reflection is imperative for rhetorical studies, particularly as it helps to identify biases, positionality, and worldviews that help shape the judgment offered by rhetorical critics (p. 17). By revisiting the relationship between motive and method, attention to the role of judgment in rhetorical field methods rearticulates the importance of the critic in doing rhetorical criticism.

Ethics draw attention to the morality of rhetoric that “is central to our conception of ourselves, our objectives, and our obligations as students, teachers, and practitioners of the art” (Johnstone, 1980, p. 1). According to McKinnon et al., “Field methods encourage critics to be accountable for the research process as an ethic of research” (2016, p. 19). Speaking for a subject or group of subjects puts a large responsibility on the rhetorical scholar to be ethical in telling and using the stories of participants. The authors further expand on their ideas of self-reflexivity as described above, arguing, “While responsibility and accountability call scholars to consider the communities that are connected to the research they produce, reflexivity flips the questions and interrogates the researcher’s connection, social location, and motivation in relation to the research” (p. 19). As a critical scholar, I must acknowledge my own limitations in doing rhetorical fieldwork on gender. In order for me to engage with performances of gender, I must make assumptions about individuals based on physical characteristics, which are social constructions used to signify gender. For example, longer hair, particularly when it is placed in braids or tied back, is a feminine trait that is often used to signify an individual as female. My engagement with the sport of quidditch forces me to confront my own assumptions of gender and

how it is performed within sport. As an ethical practice, reflexivity serves to bolster the ethical commitments of a queer project such as this.

### ***Doing Sport Research in the Field***

Doing rhetorical field methods in sport is crucial for understanding the ways in which quidditch attempts to challenge the binary model of sport. By moving to the field, I argue that we can better interrogate the relationship between gender and athleticism in sport. Only by interrogating the text on the level of performance and articulation can we fully engage with how the sport, and those who participate in it, demonstrates a queer potential for performing gender and athleticism. In the sport of quidditch, this queer potential is located within a specific cultural scene that is governed by organizational rules and social norms. The “text” that is quidditch has no clear beginning and end; rather, it is a lived cultural scene that is produced every time players take the pitch. In his work on sport ethnography, Robert R. Sands (2002) articulates the importance of cultural scenes for understanding how sport culture can move beyond a physical space, such as the quidditch pitch. Drawing on work from cognitive anthropologists of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Sands (2002) defines cultural scenes as, “repetitive, bounded, or discrete units of social interaction in which information is shared between participants” (p. 28). For example, a track or field is a cultural scene that creates specific boundaries for participation. This scene includes the physical space of the track, practice time, travel to competitions, social interactions between competitors, and even the gear chosen to race in. However, he further explains, “More than a location or even modes of information exchange between cultural members, a cultural scene is ultimately the specific knowledge used in cultural situations” (2002, p. 28). By participating in track and field, athletes gain a specific cultural knowledge about how to behave and interact at competitions. For example, when a race is about to start, the observing

athletes and fans quiet down so that competing runners can hear the starting commands from the official. Theorizing the cultural scene in this way is important because social interaction is not tied to a specific place, but generated by social interaction between participants, spectators, and fans. This also gives insight into the embodied performance of athletes as they participate in a cultural scene like that of quidditch.

Engaging with sport through field methods turns the attention of the rhetorical critic to the embodied experiences of athletes, fans, and participants. Kath Woodward (2009) explains, “[Sporting] bodies are material; they include the physical bodies that are involved in sporting practices and the organizational bodies which regulate what is called sport” (p. 1). These embodied experiences give insight into the queer potential of quidditch. By allowing players to express their own versions of gender, rather than those enforced by the binary nature of sport, quidditch utilizes a queer performance space to disrupt the gendered model of sport. Rules and norms that govern sport are predicated on social constructions of gendered bodies and how those bodies should perform. In a classic study of gendered embodiment, Young (1980) articulates how young girls in particular are socialized by their experiences and through their relationship to gendered embodiment, or what Young identifies as feminine bodily comportment. This is most noticeable in Young’s example of “throwing like a girl,” which serves as the title for her provocative essay. Young argues that “throwing like a girl” is not an inherent difference between men and women, but instead a social condition of women’s bodies. More specifically, women are socialized to throw in a particular way, which limits the use of their body. Nancy Theberge (2003) argues that sport is a place of empowerment, particularly for female athletes as their embodied performances of athleticism challenge hegemonic structures. How an individual

athlete constructs their personal relationship between body and self can differ wildly. Work by Woodward (2009) supports these claims, particularly when she states,

Sporting bodies and sporting practices offer the possibility of transformation and of retrenchment and also highlight the disjunctions and disruptions as well as the continuities between disciplinary regimes and regulatory practices and the material bodies which they target. (p. 176)

For Woodward, those concerned with bodies, particularly sporting bodies, should turn to theories of embodiment because they challenge “the division between subject and object” (p. 1). Given the queer potential of a sport such as quidditch, it is an ideal place to examine embodied performances of gender that serve as alternatives to the bi-gender model of sport.

Theberge (2003) turns to work by David Whitson (1994) who argues, “[A] feminist challenge to masculine privilege in sport must look to alternatives to the male model of sport, with its emphasis on domination and force” (p. 511). Whitson (1994) argues,

For feminist reconstructions of sporting and physical practices to have a broader effect (among women and men alike), popular understandings of empowerment and the powerful body must move away from the traditional masculine preoccupation with force and domination toward a new emphasis on personal experiences of skill and pleasure in motion and on sharing these experiences with others. (p. 363)

Theberge, while recognizing the importance of alternative forms of embodiment, challenges Whitson’s suggested alternatives, which include noncontact sports and competitive aerobics. Instead, Theberge turns to work by Martha McCaughey (1997), who articulates the potential for “physical feminism.” McCaughey argues that women’s experiences in self-defense training challenge views of feminine embodiment that are grounded in weakness and victimization. In her



analysis of body checking in young women's hockey, Theberge (2003) furthers this argument by arguing that participation in adolescent hockey leagues offer young women a sense of empowerment. Because women's hockey is structured as an alternative to men's hockey (women are prohibited from bodily contact), the sport is played as it is meant to be, where the focus is on speed, finesse, and play making (Theberge, 2000). Despite these differences, Theberge found that young women still view hockey as a physical and aggressive sport, and those women who participate in hockey often draw enjoyment from the physical nature. Women's hockey, as an alternative to men's hockey, faces a dilemma, particularly for feminist scholars interested in alternatives to the male model of sport. On one hand, individual performances of embodiment can be viewed as sites of empowerment, particularly as young women engage with understandings of gender, the body, and physicality. However, on the other hand, Theberge (2003) argues that the pervasiveness of the male model, which focuses on physicality and dominance, limits potential for societal transformation.

As an activity on the margins of sport, quidditch has the potential to challenge both the bi-gender and male models of sport by allowing individual players to perform gender in a sport where gendered performances of athleticism have yet to be culturally constructed. By turning to rhetorical field methods, individual, embodied performances of gender reveal the ways in which quidditch functions as a queer alternative to sport. In order to fully interrogate the queer potential of quidditch, it is important to move from the text into the field, or in this case in to a quidditch tournament. Following the work brought together in the edited volume by McKinnon, Asen, Chávez, and Howard (2016), I take up the sport of quidditch as a site of queer performance where athleticism is constructed in terms of fluid gender identities. Because quidditch is played competitively all over the United States, I attended a regional tournament hosted by the US

Quidditch Association that provided a large representation of teams and players. The tournament took place over two days in northern Texas and attracted college and community teams from various states in the American Southwest, all of which hoped to qualify for the 2018 US Quidditch Cup in Round Rock, Texas. Using the methods outlined by McKinnon et al. (2016), I collected data through ethnographic observations, autoethnographic reflections, and semi-structured participant interviews. Through a critical analysis of the text, I argue that quidditch has the potential to challenge binary assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality in sport by altering the physical playing space and allowing queer performances of athleticism, but that potential is limited by larger binary gender structures in sport.

### **Gender and Performance: From Book to Field**

Gender and identity has been a widely studied topic by scholars interested in the writings of J.K. Rowling, and has sparked much debate over Rowling's treatment of female characters in the *Harry Potter* series. Pugh and Wallace (2006) argue, "[E]ven within J. K. Rowling's exuberantly fantastic plot structures and the ostensibly post-feminist coeducational space of Hogwarts, heteronormative heroism narrows the range of culturally viable narrative actions and plots" (p. 261). Mayes-Elma (2006) also argues that Rowling's characters are continually subjected to harmful gender roles and constantly positioned as the "other." The sport of Quidditch, as described in the books, is one such place where critical scholars have interrogated Rowling's treatment of gender and identity. Heilman and Donaldson (2009) contend that female Quidditch players are victims of this heteronormative writing style in that, despite the number of female Quidditch players in Rowling's fictional world, they are only allowed to score when their participation does not change the outcome of the match. In contrast to these claims of gender conformity, Christopher Bell argues that the limiting of female characters happens on the level of

the reader, with no basis in the text (2016). Instead, Gallardo-C and Smith (2003) argue that the writings of Rowling engage “in a self-reflective critique on many levels and therefore belongs to a ‘new’ type of children’s literature that interrogates and deconstructs traditional expectations of gender roles” (p. 203). It is through this lens that the Harry Potter generation approaches issues of gender, identity, and sexuality, particularly when it comes to the sport of Quidditch (Gierzynski & Eddy, 2013).

In Rowling’s original writings of Quidditch, readers are offered brief glimpses of the sport through the eyes of the protagonist, Harry Potter. This means that most play is centered on a male character, despite women playing a large role in the sport. In the fictional work *Quidditch Through the Ages*, Kennilworthy Whisp (2001) traces the historical foundations of Quidditch and its popularity in the magical world. As a magical sport, witches (women) and wizards (men) alike have perfected Quidditch over thousands of years. Wizarding Quidditch is played on magic, flying broomsticks with seven players per team. The object of the game, according to Gryffindor Captain and Keeper Oliver Wood, is to throw the Quaffle through one of the three hoops at the opposite end a large, grassy field, which are guarded by a Keeper (Rowling, 1997). Three Chasers attempt to score as many points as possible before the Golden Snitch is caught by the Seeker, which signals the end of the game. In order to hinder the performance of the other players, two Beaters from each team direct enchanted Bludgers (iron balls) around the pitch, which are capable of knocking players from brooms and causing serious injury. While scoring a goal with the Quaffle is worth ten points, a successful catching of the Golden Snitch earns that team one hundred fifty points.

The non-magical sport of quidditch arose as a way for fans of Harry Potter to recreate the magic of their childhood. Gierzynski and Eddy (2013) argue that the popularity of Harry Potter

led to the introduction of the Harry Potter generation: a large group of Millennials who grew up reading the books and watching the movies, and who thus grew up with the characters in *Harry Potter*. In the introduction to an edited volume on Harry Potter studies, Lisa S. Brenner (2015) argues that, “[The] Harry Potter fandom has certainly challenged notions of authorial control, expanded opportunities for identity exploration (especially in terms of gender), and formed grassroots communities that are using creativity to positively impact the world around them” (p. 7). Through a variety of outlets, fans of Harry Potter are expanding what it means to be a fan and how that identity is performed. Brenner (2015) states, “Potter performance is thus broad and inclusive: It encompasses rituals in which laypeople can participate, planned experiences tied to specific environments, games that include characters and specific rules, and interactions through technology” (p. 16). Today, quidditch has grown well beyond a performance of fandom and thus expands what it means to perform as a fan. While many come to the sport of quidditch because of their identification with the *Harry Potter* fandom, others come for the athletic experience and accessibility of the sport. This is important because it separates the sport of quidditch from fandom performances like those of cosplay or live action role-playing (larp or larping) (Bowman, 2015). Quidditch remains a combination of both sport and fan performance, blurring the lines between the two.

The absence of flying brooms has done little to hinder fans of *Harry Potter* from bringing the fictional sport to life. *The Chicago Tribune* describes the sport as a mix of basketball and rugby, with elements of hockey and dodge ball sprinkled in (Sosa, 2016; for a more detailed description see Popple, 2015; Seagrave, 2017). However the sport is described, the goal remains the same: remain as true to the literary origins of the sport as humanly possible. Muggle quidditch attempts to recreate the fantasy sport created by Rowling with the absence of magic,

but with the same spirit of gender inclusiveness. In her analysis of gender equality in Quidditch, Jennifer Popple (2015) argues that this blending of fan performance into a competitive sport disrupts gendered expectations of sport and positions quidditch as a parody of sport culture, particularly through performances of gender. Popple (2015) turns to the work of Butler who writes,

[G]ender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin... [P]arodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. (Butler, 1993, pp. 175-176, cited in Popple, 2015, p. 202)

Ultimately, Popple (2015) argues that the use of the broom as a form of parody is what makes the sport of quidditch so unique. She argues,

The magic of the flying broomsticks further levels the playing field. The size and speed of the player matters less than his or her flying ability and broom brand. Brooms thereby augments the players' own strengths and create a more egalitarian gender relationship on the pitch. In this game, qualities like strategy, teamwork, planning, and execution of complicated plays are what eventually differentiate the players; these qualities can be equally possessed by males or females. The wizarding Quidditch players, thereby, serves as signifiers of what Jennifer L. Metz calls "a utopian fantasy of gender equality" (2012, p. 175), stealthily packaged in the familiar form of competitive sport. (2015, p. 194)

The non-magical version of the sport is limited in how to diminish disparities in size and physicality since there is no magical broom to equalize the playing field. Despite these drawbacks, quidditch was created with ideas of gender equality in mind. (For a detailed interview about the creating of quidditch, see Delle, 2015). However, departing from the work of

Popple which positions quidditch as parody, I examine the specific ways in which gender is performed in the field. I argue that quidditch disrupts the gendered nature of sport through the altering of physical space that allows athletes to construct an athletic identity that relies on fluid gender performances.

### **Performances of Gender and Athleticism in Quidditch**

As game time approached 17 minutes in one particular match, timekeepers called for the seeker from each team. For a brief reminder, the job of the seeker is to remove a yellow flag from the back of a person dressed as the golden snitch. This person is an impartial player and generally serves as the snitch for multiple matches throughout a tournament. The successful catching of the snitch results in the end of the game and a reward of 150 points to the team that catches it. The snitch for this particular match was a large, white male who walked across the field with an air of confidence, knowing how important his role is. As his time was called, the snitch began making his way across the pitch, trying to put as much space between him and the two oncoming seekers. In this match, both seekers were male, as was the case for most of the matches during this tournament. Each wore a yellow headband or bandana to signify their role as the seeker. At 18 minutes, the timekeepers released the seekers from their starting area and they took off across the pitch after the snitch. The rules of the game prevent the seekers from outright tackling the snitch, and any attempt at the flag must be made while the snitch is standing. To prevent the seekers from darting around him, the snitch attempted to push their hands away, pull at their brooms, and even throw them to the ground. When one seeker would get too close, an opposing beater would hit the seeker with one of the bludgers, sending them back to their hoops in order to tag back in the game. Thus, catching the snitch requires skill, strategy, and quick thinking, making strength and force irrelevant. Shifting the focus from strength to skill is but one

way the sport of quidditch challenges gendered assumptions of athleticism. In the following section, I engage with the text/field of quidditch by first, articulating how quidditch creates a queer performance space, and second, by examining ways in which performances of athletic identity disrupt the binary model of sport.

### ***Creating a Performance Space***

The morning that I attended the regional quidditch tournament was filled with a lot of uncertainty. I should admit that I am a large fan of Harry Potter, having attended midnight book releases, early movie premiers, and even scholarly conferences on the subject. Yet, I had never attended a quidditch tournament before this. My knowledge of the sport is limited to seeing teams practice on campus, YouTube clips, and documentaries, as well as my engagement with feminist quidditch blogs (Rigda, 2016). Despite these interactions, I had no idea what to expect when I arrived. This anxiety was compounded by a cold front that had moved through the region resulting in a series of storms that would ultimately delay the start of the tournament, change the schedule, and limit the number of competitive spaces. Thankfully, the staff at USQA actively updated their website with useful information about the location, schedule, and start times. Despite my reservations, the inclement weather did not seem to deter any of the teams from arriving for the start of the first round of play. Because of the weather, the USQA was forced to move the location of the matches to a turf field located inside of a baseball stadium, the importance of which will be explained later. As much as an inconvenience as this move would be on the schedule, it was unique in that it brought all the teams and players to one area for the majority of the tournament. What started off as a cold and rainy morning turned into a beautiful spring day filled with energy, excitement, and hours of competitive quidditch. I use this personal reflection here to highlight the environment created by the quidditch tournament and situate

myself within the rhetorical field of quidditch. Doing so allows me to interrogate the first way in which the sport of quidditch disrupts gender: altering the physical space in which the sport is performed.

Moving into the field of a collegiate quidditch tournament allows me to engage with the cultural scene created by the repetitive interactions between players and the spaces in which they perform. As Senda-Cook, Middleton, and Endres (2016) explain, the field has its own rhetoricity that engages in the circulation of rhetorical messages. The quidditch tournament, as a rhetorical place, is imperative for maintaining the queer potential of the sport. The nature of the quidditch, and the tournament in particular, engages in a form of queer world-making. According to Gus Yep (2002), “Queer world-making is the opening and creation of spaces without a map, the invention and proliferation of ideas without an unchanging and predetermined goal, and the expansion of individual freedom and collective possibilities without the constraints of suffocating identities and restrictive membership” (p. 35). In their essay on queer world-making in the “It Gets Better” campaign, West, Frischherz, Panther, and Brophy (2013) explain, “[T]he joining of ‘queer’ with ‘worldmaking’ redirects us to the creative capacities of individuals, together and alone, to forge relations that evade the complete capture of compulsory heteronormativities” (p. 57). Players of quidditch, the fans that support it, and the organizers of the activity engage in the creation of a space that is open to queer possibilities. Senda-Cook et al. (2016) argue that, “Conceiving the field as rhetorical place reveals that rhetoric does not operate in a vacuum; rather, it is created in places that ‘have a say’ about what type of meanings can be created” (p. 26).

The performance of gender and athleticism in quidditch is situated within a specific context that is not limited to the tournament location I attended, but expands beyond the physical



bounds of the tournament space. For example, the USQA website ([usquidditch.org](http://usquidditch.org)) features numerous images, articles, and posts about the sport. In doing research for the event, I was able to see what teams would be competing, their rosters, and even past results. The website also featured articles that highlighted specific tournaments, notable referees, and successful snitch runners. The particular context that guides the performance of gender and athleticism includes, but is not limited to, the USQA rulebook, tournament norms, interactions between players, officials, and fans, as well as interactions with the physical tournament space. These interactions function to articulate a queer space in which quidditch athletes perform identity. Perhaps the most important element that guides interactions between players is the USQA rulebook, now in the 11<sup>th</sup> iteration. As a guiding document, the rulebook adapts to the growth of the sport. As more players and teams join the league, organizational structures must expand as well. This is most notable in the number of teams chosen to move on to the national tournament from the regional tournament. Furthermore, recognizing the problems with creating a gender minimum rule, USQA adopted the language of “gender maximum.” Included in the rule are stipulations for individuals who are gender nonconforming or do not identify within the gender binary. Because quidditch is relatively new as a sport, queer world-making functions to aid participants in creating a sport that is full of queer possibilities.

As an emerging sport, the sport of quidditch relies on the creation of a unique sporting arena where gender, identity, and athleticism can be performed absent of social rules and gender norms. While the location of the tournament may change from week to week, the quidditch pitch always stays the same, which creates a sense of familiarity for the players. This pitch is physically created for the match or tournament that takes place because quidditch stadiums are yet to be created. Participants in the sport must physically alter the space in which they are

performing. For the tournament I attended, two quidditch pitches were constructed inside a baseball stadium. Using orange cones, two quidditch pitches were created in the outfield of an all turf baseball stadium. The first pitch was situated fully in right field, too far to see from the stands behind home plate, but its position inside the enclosed stadium is unmistakable. The second pitch started in left field and extended between second and third base, almost butting up against the pitchers mound. Organizers of the event physically altered the space in which they wished to play.

This altering of physical space has two effects. First, it disrupts the hegemonic space in which the pitch was created, and second, it allows players to perform identity in a space with no gendered assumptions. Baseball is arguably one of the most gendered sports (aside from American football), having different rules and leagues for male and female players. The baseball stadium is a site of hegemonic masculinity that is reified by players, coaches, and fans. For example, in an analysis of baseball player Nolan Ryan, Nick Trujillo (2000) argues that masculinity is socially constructed on the mound (of the baseball stadium). By placing the quidditch pitch within the physical space of the baseball stadium, it disrupts the gendered space of the baseball stadium. Furthermore, by viewing the sport as parody of sport culture, the players mock the gendered nature of organized sport by playing a sport that puts men and women on the same team. This disruption is amplified by the way in which players negotiate identity on and off the field. While the matches were being played, one particular team utilized the space around them. Positioning themselves on home plate, they proceeded to play whiffle ball, hitting towards the large net behind home plate and in front of the stands. Most of the players participating in the whiffle ball game outwardly appeared as male and were very enthusiastic when someone managed to hit the whiffle ball extremely well. In contrast to the displays of masculinity

happening through whiffle ball, others teams gathered around the matches being played cheering on their favorite teams. The quidditch pitch is a place that actively assists in the creation and management of identity. Each interaction relies on the embodied experiences of the athletes and their interaction with the physical space.

Altering the physical space creates tension between fan performances of identity and athletic performances of identity. I was surprised that the Harry Potter fandom did not play a large role in constructing the atmosphere of the quidditch tournament itself, despite playing a large role in the identity of the sport and advertising materials. While the banners welcoming players and fans to the tournament featured a large picture of Harry Potter reaching for a snitch alongside real-life quidditch players, and aside from a few pieces of *Harry Potter* merchandise, there was little to no mention of the game's namesake. In fact, most players and fans sported apparel from their team or school, elevating that identity over the sport identity. Each team was easily distinguishable from the next. Many of the collegiate teams were recognizable by their school colors, logos, and cheers, especially those that come from large universities known for their sport's teams. This is important because it further removes the elements of fantasy from the sport. Despite being created as a way to live out the fantasy of a magical world, the sport of quidditch is gaining legitimacy through separation from the fan community. This is significant because it firmly situates quidditch within the context of sport, rather than fan performance or cosplay. Viewing quidditch as a parody of sport culture exposes the instability of sex, gender, and sexuality of sport.

The rules of the US Quidditch Association function to facilitate the unique vision of the sport by altering the space in which the sport is played. USQA is divided into two distinct divisions that have similar rules and league structures that function to maintain the inclusivity of

the sport. The main difference between the two divisions is who is allowed to play. One division is comprised of teams that come from a specific College or University. In order to play on one of these teams, the player must be enrolled at the school, similar to any other NCAA sport. The other division is comprised of community teams made up of players who are not associated with a specific school. Notably, members of community teams can come from former collegiate teams. The previously mentioned community player told me of the frustration she feels when playing against a team that recruits former college players for their community team. Her team is open to any player, regardless of experience, commitment, or athleticism, putting them at a clear disadvantage to a team that recruits.

### ***Embodied Performances of Gender and Athleticism***

By altering the physical competition space to meet the needs of the sport, the context of a quidditch tournament removes the gendered assumptions from the space. In doing so, individual performances of gender and athleticism have the potential disrupt hegemonic gender structures of sport. The performance of gender and athleticism happens on many levels, from team to position, and even perceived athletic ability. These identities are visibly performed through clothing, roles, actions, and a number of other visual markers. It is through these interactions that players engage with and negotiate their own sense of athletic identity. Because the sport of quidditch allows athletes to perform gender and athleticism in a model that values inclusivity, the way in which gender is performed is not limited to a pre-determined set of experiences. Like other sports, performances of gender and athleticism in quidditch change from person to person and position to position. For example, one community player I spoke with told me how he (self-identified as male) was frustrated with his team for making him play as a beater for this tournament despite practicing and playing as a chaser in the past. This statement reflects how a

player's identity is largely tied to the position in which they play. In fact, each player wears a colored headband that signifies their position on the field, creating distinction among positions. Chasers wear white, keepers wear green, beaters wear black, and seekers wear yellow, demonstrating the ways in which identity is tied to position, rather than to gender. This player also explained that one of the main reasons he participated in the sport "is because of how inclusive it is" and it "helps keep him in shape." Both of these statements serve to demonstrate the queer potential of quidditch that is realized in the embodied nature of quidditch participation. By examining individual performances of gender and athleticism as unstable differential relations, quidditch disrupts normative views of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Moving in to the field to engage with performances of gender and athleticism is important for better understanding how the sport of quidditch navigates the space between reification of gender norms and maintaining a queer potential. First, it is near impossible to separate the sport of quidditch from culturally constructed understandings of sport, particularly when quidditch athletes have grown up interacting with and socialized to the gendered nature of sport. This means that the sport of quidditch is ripe with instances of hegemonic masculinity and the reification of gender performances. For example, it was clear that women were utilized less often than their male counterparts, specifically those women that did not outwardly appear masculine. This was supported by observation of quidditch matches and interaction with players, which revealed that most teams used no more than two or three female players at any given time. However, the women that did play played every position and often made key plays. Furthermore, as a rhetorician, I must acknowledge my own experiences with the gendered nature of sport and my position as a cis-gender, white male. My observation of the sport both challenged and reinforced my knowledge of gendered athleticism. Second, it is important to recognize the

limitations of observing performances of gender, specifically in a sport setting where gender is supposed to take a back seat to athleticism. In sports such as women's softball or women's gymnastics, athletes often go through great lengths to signify femininity, often using glitter or bows in their hair. The sport of quidditch, on the other hand, works to normalize gender by relying on deliberate performances of athleticism rather than gender. For example, players wore similar jerseys, shorts, and cleats, most of which resemble those of men's soccer. There are very few instances of bows or glitter to signify gender. Furthermore, quidditch is a fast-paced game where players are constantly switching in and out. This makes it difficult to "gender" players, particularly when they do not self-identify. Furthermore, my ability to "gender" players is limited on socially constructed notions of gender. While short or shaved hair is generally gendered as male, female players may also feature more masculine hairstyles. Therefore, we must take these limitations as support for the ways in which gender is performed in sport. That being said, I was struck by the way in which gender identity was minimized both on and off the pitch.

Performances at the level of position also struggle to live up to the queer potential of the sport. During my interactions with players I spoke with a community player who has played for six years on both collegiate and community teams. In our talk, this individual identified as a female beater. This identity is important because of our conversation about beaters and what it reveals about the relationship between identity, position, and gender. When asked about the roles female quidditch players took, this individual told me that it has changed a lot over the years, and that "it has gotten better." When the sport was first starting, women were often assigned to the role of beater "because they did not need to do much." In the magical version of the sport, Beaters needed to be strong in order to send the enchanted Bludger across the pitch. However,

preconceived notions of gender and athleticism did not prevent women from becoming successful Beaters. Consequently, with the absence of magic, players were unsure of the importance of beaters, and often placed female players in the position so that male players could be utilized elsewhere. As teams realized the importance of beaters in terms of strategy, women were then used strategically to hinder the athletic advantages of the opposing team. According to those I spoke with, one of the best beaters in the country is a woman who is able to eliminate potential threats and change the speed of the game. As my participant explained, “Teams look for a different type of beater, and even turn to “male beater lines” in order to best utilize the position”. The sport of quidditch has the potential to queer the binary gender model of sport by challenging how individual players approach each position. From my observations at the tournament, I noted how the activity of beating can be both physical (masculine) and strategic (female/queer) in nature. In some instances, players would go to the ground fighting over rogue bludgers. This would often result in injuries as players collided or pushed one another out of the way. Other times, beaters were used strategically to defend the snitch from the opposing team, particularly when a male seeker was up against a female seeker. Beaters are required to do more than other positions, such as chasing after bludgers, stopping chasers from scoring, and defending the snitch, which means there is no one way of performing as a beater.

During my observation of one community game, I watched as two players fought over a rolling bludger. The larger player, who identified as male during an interview, was pushing against a smaller player (who he identified as female). From my vantage point it seemed as if both players were equally fighting over the ball and neither had the clear advantage. As they were pushing against each other, both players went to the ground. As they were attempting to get up, the female struck out at the male in what I assume was retaliation for the fall. This exchange

caught the attention of line official who signaled a stoppage in play to the head referee. The whole play resulted in a foul on the male, despite both players actively showing aggression, a clear display of heteronormativity in an inclusive sport. Following the match, I talked to the male player about this play. He excitedly asked, “Did you see her punch me? I can’t believe I got the foul!” It is through embodied performances such as this that the queer potential of quidditch is mobilized.

The creation of unique positions that allow players to perform gender and athleticism in fluid terms highlights the queer potential of the sport. However, certain positions still conform to gendered norms. The snitch, as a nonpartisan player, plays an important role in the game, and the fact that snitches are normally men is both troubling and disruptive. In one game, the snitch was a large white male, standing about 6’1 with average to large build. As a snitch, he was always very aggressive, shoving players to the ground, pulling on their brooms, and actively fighting with his hands. Another snitch was much smaller, standing around 5’8, but was equally aggressive. Rather than running away, as the snitch would if it were magical, the snitch player tends to stand and fight, defending the flag from the seekers. In these moments, the snitch embodies the masculine culture of sport. He is competitive, aggressive, and does whatever he can to “win,” despite the snitch not being able to win the game. Perhaps this is where the idea of the snitch queers sport. As a nonpartisan player, the snitch disrupts current understandings of sport that are driven by the proclamation of a winner and a loser. Ending, and generally winning, the quidditch match depends on the failure of the snitch to protect the flag attached to the back of their shorts. The fact that the snitch cannot win the game calls attention to structures that have reinforced the competitive nature of sport. If the snitch cannot win, why participate? Thus, we can view the specific position of the snitch as both gendered and disruptive. The fact that



snitches tend to be male reinforces the commitment to strength and masculinity. The queer potential of the sport exists in the way in which quidditch challenges the goal of sport participation. This is radically different than other sports here every participant is working towards the goal of winning.

Performances of gender in a context such as that of quidditch function as a form of parody that further mobilize the queer potential of the sport. As Jennifer Popple (2015) argues, the obvious parody of both sport and masculinity highlights the disruptive potential of the sport. I further argue that individual performances of gender give credence to the queer potential of the sport by exposing the fluidity of gender. When a male player can perform exaggerated masculinity in the same space where any other gender can be performed disrupts the binary nature that sport is predicated on. The performance of masculinity was largely present throughout the tournament, particularly on the sidelines during important moments of the game. As a gender inclusive sport, these performances of masculinity disrupt the binary and gendered nature of sport because they function as a parody of men's sports in particular. As the tournament progressed to the later matches teams became more invested in the outcome. These games drew larger crowds and players were often louder and more involved through chants and cheers. Many of these cheers were easily recognizable as they come from schools with large and well-known sports programs. Other cheers were unique to the quidditch team, particularly if a school had two teams, or was not associated with a school. However, the point I mean to make here is that the cheers and shouts frequently turned into typical displays of masculinity. During a particularly important match between two large southern universities, male competitors used vocal displays of masculinity. When a good play was made, one male from the team would vigorously shout, jump around, and work to get others "hyped up." When the pressure was too

much, he would drop to the ground and do push-ups, preparing for his turn as a chaser. While displays such as this were out of the norm (teams generally cheered as a group), it is important for recognizing how out of place it was.

As a sport, quidditch attempts to rearticulate athleticism as an identity distinct from gender by recognizing that sex and gender categories are arbitrary social constructions. While athletes can identify as male/female/other *and* an athlete, their identity as an athlete is not dependent on their biological sex or gender. For example, while watching one team prepare for their upcoming match, I heard them providing commentary about an ongoing match. When one female beater took down another male beater, one player exclaimed, “She’s such a strong girl. She’s my idol.” As a society, we have conditioned sports and athletes to fit within specific gender categories. For example, our society has gendered portrayals of athleticism such as a hard hit in football as masculine; while a graceful synchronized swimmer is deemed feminine. In the same pre-game conversation one female player asked if anyone needed pain medication. One male player responded, “Pain makes me stronger.” However, by envisioning a sport that was created outside of the confines of professional sport, the creators of muggle quidditch have attempted to create a queer sport space that privileges athleticism over gender.

The privileging of athleticism over gender is most evident in the role of the chaser, responsible for scoring a majority of the points. Teams often put their fastest players at the role of chaser in order to dodge bludgers and score more points. From my observation, I recorded numerous times when female players took on the role of chaser, not only scoring points, but successfully defending the three hoops from the opposing teams. I watched as one female waited behind the hoops for the quaffle to be passed to her. Following a strategic pass from a teammate, the female player made an athletic jump to throw the quaffle into the hoop. In doing so, the sport

of quidditch allows athletes to construct their identity apart from their gender identity. These identities are tied to the position they play, creating an athletic identity that is unique to each player. It is important to note that I am not dismissing the lived experiences of players that relate to their own sense of gender identity. Instead, I argue that their experiences of gender and athleticism can inform and construct their identity in distinct ways, rather than athleticism policing their identity.

Perhaps the way in which quidditch exhibits the most queer potential is through a visual challenging the gender binary. I previously articulated that identifying a player's gender is complicated due to the nature of the game. Gender identification relies on the appearance of socially constructed gender markers. When gender markers and traits are (rarely, but sometimes) used to subvert the maximum gender rule, or to reinforce the identity of a player in order to meet the gender rule, quidditch queers the visual representations of gender. During a conversation with one community player, I was told of a scenario where one team did not have enough players of the opposite gender to compete that season (most of the team identified as male), which meant they would have to forfeit any match they played. In an attempt to meet the gender maximum rule, one male player announced to the head official before an upcoming match, "I now identify as a woman." While this is an extreme example of using gender as a competitive advantage, there are also situations where gender needed to be confirmed or reinforced. The same player told me of a situation where one woman specifically braided her hair to signify her gender because her gender identity was constantly questioned or challenged by officials or other teams. The very fact that players can change their outward appearance to reflect a specific gender, speaks to very essence of gender as performative, reinforcing the queer potential of the sport. It also highlights the potential for a sport like quidditch to subvert socially acceptable performances

of gender. When athletes are able to alter their performance of sex/gender to subvert arbitrary rules that define sex/gender, quidditch offers an avenue to deconstruct categories of sex and gender. It is in these moments that the queer potential of quidditch is realized, overcoming hegemonic discourses that attempt to define the sport in terms of gendered ways of doing sport.

## **Conclusion**

The sport of quidditch has the potential to destabilize the binary nature of sport, and to disrupt male-centered models of sport that privilege force and domination. By offering players and fans a place to engage with sport in a queer environment, quidditch has the potential to alter how sports are structured, particularly in the United States. By altering the physical space where quidditch is played, the quidditch tournament allows players to rhetorically construct gender and athleticism in a way that is not bound by social constructions of sex, gender, and sport. The binary nature of sport limits the array of gender performances that can be utilized during a sporting event. Sports such as football call for displays of dominance and aggression, which are often articulated by war metaphors. Likewise, figure skating, for both women and men, is defined in terms of feminine performances that are artistic and emotional. The sport of quidditch challenges this notion, allowing players to use the queer space as a form of empowerment. Queer embodied performances of athleticism change what it means to be an athlete by separating athleticism from social constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality.

There are important limitations to the sport of quidditch existing as a gender inclusive activity. First of all, as articulated in the analysis, women are used significantly less than their male counterparts. Although the speed of play limited my ability to identify players, and the fact that my identification of players relied on socially constructed gender symbols, I found that most teams only played two females at one time. While this strategy seems to be changing,

preconceived notions of gender still inform game strategy and decision-making, particularly when strategy is used from other sports. Second, women have reported sexism in the sport, which is troubling for the future of a sport that is predicated on inclusivity. In my discussion with a participant, they mentioned there used to be more talks about dividing the sport into gender categories. However, this talk has significantly decreased, particularly as teams have embraced a gender-inclusive model.

Despite these limitations, it is still productive to recognize the queer potential of a sport like quidditch, which has the ability to disrupt the binary nature of sport. Through a rearticulation of athleticism as separate from gender, quidditch players are opening new possibilities for performances of athleticism that rely on the fluidity of gender. Additionally, the sport is creating spaces for individuals who do not conform to social constructions of gender to participate in sport. By viewing these performances as unstable differential relations, the true potential of quidditch can be realized.

CHAPTER IV

DISRUPTION ON ICE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

OF JOHNNY WEIR'S PERFORMANCE OF GENDER AND ATHLETICISM

**Introduction**

Johnny Weir has always stood out in the professional figure skating community, choosing to express his individuality in every performance, many of which received plenty of media attention. Despite winning multiple US Championship titles and making multiple Olympic appearances, Weir is never remembered for how great of an athlete he was, but for how different and unique of a performer he continues to be, even after retirement. Weir's eccentric costume choices and artistic routines earned him an abundance of international notoriety and dedicated fans, but among figure skating commentators and officials his choices sparked backlash and discontent. For example, after Weir earned sixth place at the 2010 Vancouver games, two sports broadcasters, Alain Goldberg and Claude Mailhot, took the opportunity to voice their opinion on Weir's influence on young male skaters, stating, "They'll think all the boys who skate will end up like him. It sets a bad example" (Harmon, 2010). The broadcasters went on to speculate about Weir's biological sex, arguing that Weir should have to submit to a "gender test" if he wanted to continue in the men's competition. The public attention to Weir's sex, gender, and sexuality reflect the tension within professional sports to differentiate between men and women's categories, and even entire sports. American culture in particular has become so entangled in sport that male and female athletes are expected to mimic culturally determined gender roles through athletic performances. Sabo and Panepinto (1990) detail how coaches use phrases such as "pussies" or "limp wrists" in order to emasculate male athletes and force them to do better.

Statements even go as far as claiming that players or opponents “play like a girl” or “your sister can do better than that.” Sabo and Panepinto (1990) argue that these statements are “driven by homophobia and misogyny” and “affirm asymmetric and opposed categories of gender” (p. 120). When athletes do not conform to these cultural scripts their identity is challenged. Therefore, the public contestation over Weir’s gender and athleticism is an ideal place to interrogate gender in sport from a queer perspective.

For all that Weir accomplished on the ice, sports broadcasters and figure skating commentators routinely marginalized his athletic identity. On paper, Johnny Weir is a figure skating legend. Growing up in rural Delaware, Weir taught himself to skate on frozen ponds near his house and on roller skates in his basement, an extraordinary feat for any athlete (Weir, 2011). Just four years after teaching himself to skate, Weir became the World Junior Champion, and with years of practice and discipline, he would go on to become a three-time United States Figure Skating Champion, earning titles in 2004, 2005, and 2006; a World Bronze Medalist during the 2007-2008 season; and a two-time Olympian, placing fifth in 2006 and sixth in 2010. Despite the major success Weir saw as a figure skater, commentators and critics were often confused by his choices in costume, song, and make-up, which made him appear more feminine. Public discourse surrounding Johnny Weir functioned to make his ambiguous performance of gender legible by articulating his authenticity and uniqueness as a skater, rather than his competitive skill. John Sloop (2004) argues that public discourses can normalize gender ambiguity by closing off alternatives and reinforcing hegemonic norms. The way Weir was packaged for the viewing audience marginalized his complicated identity and attempted to remove any threat of Weir not being masculine enough for the sport of figure skating. For

example, the media often questioned Weir's sexuality as if his sexual orientation would miraculously explain his artistic and feminine performance style. The *New York Times* wrote,

During a figure skating broadcast last year, the announcer Mark Lund, who is openly gay, said, "I don't think he's representative of the community I want to be a part of," and, "I don't need to see a prima ballerina on the ice," before praising Lysacek's masculinity." (Schwarz, 2008, para. 20)

However, as Weir argued on numerous occasions, "It's not part of my sport and it's private. I can sleep with whomever I choose and it doesn't affect what I'm doing on the ice" (Weir, 2011). Despite these candid comments from Johnny Weir, it remains nearly impossible to separate gender from athleticism.

It is clear that Weir's performance of gender and athleticism created a sense of unease for the figure skating community, which makes it necessary to critically examine Weir's embodied performance as a figure skater. Scholars such as Brandon Bumstead (2011) have argued that mediated discourse surrounding Weir, such as print and online media, works to domesticate his queer potential; however, given the current social climate of sport in the United States, which has seen a dramatic rise in openly gay, transgender, and queer athletes, it is necessary to revisit Johnny Weir as an athlete with queer potential. Even though Weir did not publicly come out until after retiring from competitive skating, his visibility as a queer body created spaces for other LGBTQ athletes. *Bustle* writer Torey Van Oot (2018) explains, "Weir's bold performances on and off the ice have done more than inspire individuals — he's also been credited with attracting droves of new followers to the sport." Paula Slater, founder of the international skating site *Golden Skate* told *Bustle*, "Younger generation fans were fed through his sometimes unorthodox, yet entertaining, routines he delivered in his exhibition programs, along with



interesting costumes. He made bold statements with flair. He was, and still is, an extraordinary artist — with bling!" (Van Oot, 2018, para. 26). Weir's unapologetic authenticity paved the way for future skaters to find their own place within the sport. For example, during the 2018 Olympic games in South Korea, the world fell in love with openly gay figure skater Adam Rippon. Like Weir, Rippon defies conventional expectations of gendered sport and blurs the lines between athleticism and artistry with routines that are artistically pleasing but exhibit raw strength and power. In this chapter, I argue that Weir's artistic performance of figure skating works to disrupt the binary system of professional sport by deconstructing the binary categories of performance. Drawing on theories of gender and queer theory, as well as theories of delivery, I critically examine Johnny Weir's embodied performance of gender. I argue that the performances themselves represent a productive queer performance of sport that rearticulates athleticism in new ways, by drawing on the fluidity of gender. Weir's presence in professional sport allows us to deconstruct the identity of an athlete and expose the limits of gender in sport, particularly in regards to the rhetorical construction of athletic genders. The continual discussion of Weir as a queer body calls attention to Weir's actual queerness and amplifies his queer potential for a radical refiguring of sporting practices.

### **Embodiment, Sport, and the Rhetorics of Aesthetics**

Sport, and athletes who participate in sport, are ideal sites to examine embodied performances as queer disruptions of gender. In the opening chapter to *Sporting Rhetoric: Performance, Games, & Politics*, Rachel Kraft and Barry Brummett (2009) argue that, "Sports often involve showing oneself and others how to be masculine, how to possess cultural values such as loyalty or aggressiveness" (p. 18). Citing work by Lindemann and Cherney (2008), Kraft and Brummett conclude that sport involves "communicative performances of enculturation"

(Lindemann & Cherney, 2008, p. 120). It is through sport that bodies are conditioned to reflect cultural assumptions of sex and gender. Sporting bodies are important for examination because they are inherently tied with culture, and individual bodies are viewed as sites of cultural performance and control. According to Foucault (1977), “[T]he body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (p. 25). Drawing from Foucault, Judith Butler (1993) argues that bodies, and more importantly gender, are socially constructed by language. Butler (1998) applies this concept to female athletes, arguing that, “[I]deals of gender are not only imposed retrospectively on athletic activity by photography or by the media, but they form part of its meaning and structure, such that no athletic activity can proceed without some reference to these ideas” (para. 3.) In other words, the way we construct understandings of athleticism is dependent upon social constructions of gender. It is this very logic that allows language to push back against dominant narratives of gender norms.

The rhetorics of aesthetics are one way to approach the study of the body as a site of performance and disruption. Poulakos (2007) argues that rhetoric relies on an aesthetic performance that stems from an orator making stylistic decisions about their rhetoric. Drawing on a tradition of aesthetics in speech making, Whitson and Poulakos (2003) explain that aesthetics emphasizes beauty and artistry, and that within a tradition of aesthetics, orators rely on their performance to convey an impulse rather than a specific message (p. 141). Building upon this idea of aesthetics and rhetoric, Debra Hawhee argues that Burke’s work is an ideal place to take up the body as a rhetorical artifact because of his attention to bodies, language, and discourse. According to Hawhee (2009), “It is his inclination toward bodies...that first sets Burke to investigate rhetoric, communication, meaning making, and language” (p. 8). Utilizing

the writings of Burke, Hawhee demonstrates “the ways multiple discourses on the body in the twentieth century differently constitute bodies and, more pointedly, how language, meaning, and communication both emerge from and help constitute bodies” (p. 9). By focusing on the body, Hawhee suggests we can complicate the easy separation between mind and body, body and culture, and body and language. She concludes, “When we talk about bodies, that is, we talk about sensation, touch, texture, affect, materiality, performativity, movement, gesture, habits, entertainment, biology, physiology, rhythm, and performance, for starters” (p. 5). The rhetoric of aesthetics, then, is primarily concerned with delivery, making it critical to the study of performance.

Maggie Werner (2017) advocates for the use of delivery as a critical methodology, arguing that it “focuses critical attention on the ways that performative arts like burlesque, which feature the body as spectacle, enrich the study of embodied rhetoric by foregrounding multiple modes of symbolic communication” (pp. 45-46). She argues that live performances, such as erotic neo-burlesque shows, teach audiences about the language of bodies. Werner (2017) states,

Because delivery includes a range of material communication practices and contexts, it invites us to imagine symbolic action expansively. The interrelated common topics of body, space, audience, and genre include both linguistic and material symbolic practices. Therefore, delivery as a method attends to the complexities of the body’s communication. As Hawhee notes, ‘[B]odies and language...are irreducibly distinct and yet parallel and complementary...often, if not always in effect moving together.’ Yet because rhetorical theory has so long been ‘under the spell of discursive construction’ (2009, p. 166), it can be difficult to understand or appreciate the body’s many ways of communicating outside

linguistic practice. Using delivery to analyze rhetorical bodies can enrich that understanding and appreciation. (p. 55)

Bodies communicate symbolically, through their interactions with objects, other bodies, and even the way they move alone in new and innovative ways. Drawing on neo-burlesque performances, Werner argues that the “use of material symbols, in particular movement and costume, to communicate with audiences illustrates nonlinguistic elements functioning rhetorically in performance.” (p. 46). Neo-burlesque performances highlight the rhetorical power of bodies to produce discourse. When bodies are placed in a specific scene, set to music, or altered with costumes, make-up, or props, they deliver a nonlinguistic and aesthetic argument. In order to understand and comprehend these nonlinguistic arguments, scholars must turn to critical methodologies that privilege elements of performance, like that of delivery. According to Werner, “Delivery, the cannon that concerns presentation, offers a rhetorical framework for understanding the ways that performing bodies communicate in multiple symbolic codes” (p. 46). Sporting bodies in particular are a rich site to take up delivery as a critical methodology because bodies are already always in motion. Echoing the thoughts of Hawhee on Burke, Werner argues that, “Bodies in action can teach us about rhetoric *of* the body itself.” (p. 57).

Approaching the study of bodies from a methodology that privileges delivery allows rhetorical scholars to expand our understanding of bodies as symbolic artifacts. This is particularly true in the case of sport, which is concerned with performance and style as athletic bodies are put on display in televised contests. As Sunshine P. Webster (2009) argues, “By reading the athletic body, we begin to uncover meanings, contradictions, intent and lack thereof” (p. 49).

In order to stress the potential of delivery as a critical methodology, Werner (2017) identifies four *topoi* that are important for analyzing performance rhetoric: genre, body/persona,

space, and audience. First, the *topos* of genre “comprises the bodies that perform, the spaces in which they perform, and the audiences to whom they perform” (p. 50). Genre is about context, reminiscent of what Kenneth Burke identifies as *scene* in the pentad. For figure skating, genre may include the individual figure skater (or pair), the physical ice and the location of the arena, as well as the multiple audiences they perform to/for. According to Werner, “[W]hen analyzing embodied performance, the *topos* of genre provides insight into the ways that the other *topoi* come together” (p. 51). In other words, the space in which figure skaters like Johnny Weir perform both their routines and their gender change given the context. Second, the *topos* of body “accounts for the ways that the body is constituted by physical performances associated with delivery - movement, clothes, and voice - but also by a constellation of identity features such as race, gender, and ethnicity” (p. 51). Additionally, the *topos* of body includes the idea of persona, which functions to construct the identity of the performer through the use of movement, body types, costumes, spaces, and a multitude of other factors. Persona also functions to illustrate the ways in which the *topos* of body interacts with the other *topoi* of audience, space, and genre. Together, the *topoi* of body and persona are important because they reveal power of the body as a site of discourse production. She argues, “Burke’s engagement with bodies from a variety of disciplinary vantage points foregrounds the body as a vital, connective, mobile, and transformational force, a force that exceeds – even as it bends and bends with – discourse” (Hawhee, 2009, p. 7). Third, the *topos* of space is concerned with what a given body can say and/or do and who an audience will react to it. According to Werner, space “considers the overlapping questions of who is authorized to speak (body), and in what way (genre), and to whom (audience)” (p. 53). Finally, audience “prompts critics to consider the performed tests as developing from a dynamic rhetorical situation in which audiences and rhetors co-create

discourse” (p. 54). “Even if a performance is invented, arranged, and packaged before it is delivered, audiences will react differently to it, constructing a new experience for both performers and other audience members” (p. 54). Therefore, delivery as a critical methodology is ideal for examining embodied performances of gender that rely on aesthetic arguments of movement, costumes, music, and artistry.

### **Gender, Performance, and Figure Skating**

Men’s figure skating, as both an aesthetic art and an athletic feat, is an ideal place to take up delivery as a critical methodology. According to Webster (2009), “Stylistic images of professional athletes position the body as the locus of athletic style...The body represents the site of meaning and the performative site of style” (p. 48). As Mary Lousie Adams (2011) argues, “In no other sport...are athletes required to pay so much attention to the aesthetic factors that are not embedded in the actual physical movements that make up the competition” (p. 206). The use of costumes and music is a clear indication of why men’s figure skating is labeled as a feminine sport; these aesthetic elements are viewed as feminine, decorative, and unnecessary.

Consequently, men’s figure skating has a rocky relationship with the social construct of masculinity. In her work on gender and figure skating, Adams (2011) traces this troubling relationship, arguing that fears of effeminacy have shaped the discourse of contemporary figure skating, thus relegating it to a feminine sport. Compared to professional sports like football or basketball, figure skating is always already a sport where the masculinity of the athlete is questioned and heavily policed. As Adams (2011) notes, “Most figure skaters confront the sport’s binary gender norms as soon as they put on their skates. As any toddler who has ever been to a rink can tell you, boys wear black skates and girls wear white skates” (p. 206). A young boy wearing hand-me-down white skates to practice would be subject to the same ridicule as a

young football player wearing hand-me-down pink cleats. Anxieties over costumes, music, and artistry have shaped the discourse of professional figure skating, men's in particular. Johnny Weir explained in a 2010 interview that, "[I]t involves everything. Music and emotion and theater, dance, costuming, theatrics. All these things go into one sport -- that's insane" (Caple, 2010). For example, most male skaters are adorned in simple costumes, usually in black. And although sequins and glitter have made an appearance, there is still some uniformity to how much and where. Even still, male skaters have pushed back against new rules introduced in 2004 have forced skaters "to pay attention to both aesthetic and athletic skills and to make sure they do not reduce their athleticism to jumping" (Adams, 2011, p. 194). As this passage articulates, men's figure skating works hard to ensure that performances of masculine athleticism are defined by strength and power rather than style and artistry.

Decisions such as these by the governing bodies of figure skating work to police athletic performances of gender. Opponents of costumes and artistic music in figure skating claim that it moves the sport more towards the category of art than sport. As Adams (2011) explains, "Costumes push skating beyond the comfortable limits of sport discourses" (p. 212). Despite other men's sports obsessing over uniforms, style, and brand names, figure skating remains on the outside looking in, unable to escape the criticism of being too artistic, and thus too feminine. As Erica Rand (2013) argues,

Figure skating is plagued by two binarizing notions about gender that fuel and follow from sex segregation: that athleticism itself has a gender, which is male or at least masculine; and that sports segregated by sex should have appropriate, recognizable differences in the male and female versions of them. (p. 445)

These two postulations place the sport of figure skating in a precarious position. First, by treating athleticism as something that can have a gender, the way an athlete can perform gender is contained by societal expectations of what an athlete looks like. Second, forces within sport “work to determine what athletic feats, manifestations of grace, body adornment, choreography, movement styles, and music should be categorized as appropriate for either females or males but not both” (Rand, 2013, p. 446). Therefore, the complex ways in which masculinity is performed and policed in figure skating displays exactly how precarious the concept of gender is.

Indeed, Adams (2011) argues that it is precisely men’s figure skating’s uneasy relationship to hegemonic masculinity that makes figure skating an ideal place to challenge ideologies of gender. She explains,

Gay [men] have been encouraged to stop passing as straight, to claim their own identities, and stop catering to norms, structures, and values that were designed for and imposed by others. Once out, the assumption goes, all the energy that went into hiding could be turned to more important and more fabulous things. It’s time for figure skating to come out, to stop trying to pass as just another sport. (Adams, 2011, p. 239)

Men’s figure skating has the potential to challenge notions of gender in sport because of its unique population of athletes that reveal the fluidity of gender. The position of men in a highly feminized sport like figure skating becomes an ideal place to explore the limits of gender as individual skaters already perform gender differently, outside of the male body/masculine gender/heterosexuality relationship. By viewing these subject positions as unstable differential relations, male figure skaters can reveal the limits of sex-segregated sport. Adams (2011) calls the performance of male femininity in sport *effeminacy* because of the way in which it “suggests a different kind of movement analogy, and an extension or a stretching, a sliding of the feminine



into masculinity” (p. 21). Instead of viewing effeminacy as an alternative femininity, Adams argues that it should be viewed as an alternative masculinity because of the possibilities it offers for current and future understandings of the relationship between male bodies and masculinity.

However, it is this very assumption that contains the queer potential of figure skating within the discourse of the sport. Because athletes already perform gender differently in the sport of figure skating, public discourse simply writes views any challenge to binary structures as a product of participation in a feminized sport. Even still, the way Johnny Weir and other male figure skaters perform gender is even more radical in that it moves beyond the accepted limits of gender performance, even for male figure skaters. It is in this space between athleticism and artistry that male figure skaters can disrupt the commitment to a gendered system of sport. Because men’s figure skating is already a space that is contained by assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality, radical performances of gender are productive sites to explore the limits of binary gender in sports.

### **The Queer Potential of Johnny Weir**

As a professional figure skater, Johnny Weir stands out for his radical performances that move beyond the acceptable limits of gender, even for a sport like men’s figure skating. Weir’s performances make aesthetic arguments about gender and athleticism in the world of sport that reignite debate over corporeality and materiality of the body. By viewing Weir’s performances as an embodied sporting practice, I argue that Weir “werks” from the margins of professional sport to disrupt gender. Made famous by RuPaul, a black drag queen and host of LOGO’s *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, the word “werk” comes from the phrase, “You better werk hunty,” and serves as an encouragement in drag culture (Forester, 2016). Today, “werk” is a term that has come to signify fierceness and authenticity, good looks, or a great accomplishment. In their 2016 book on how to

be fabulous and confident like a drag queen, Huba and Kronbergs (2016) define *werk* as, “(a) A term meaning to ‘work your body’; (b) to strut, especially on the runway; (c) to give an outstanding presentation.” They further explain, “To leave our comfort zone and go after our dreams, even when it feels like a big risk, is exactly what taking action, what *werking* is!” (Huba & Kronbergs, 2016). To operationalize the word “werk” as a rhetorical tool, I argue that for a performance to do “werk” it must exhibit three characteristics. First, the performance must contain a queer element that draws on the performativity of gender and the manipulation of the body. Second, the performance must exhibit a level of authenticity and originality that add to the aesthetics of the performance. Finally, drawing on the definition of Huba and Kronbergs (2016), the performance must elicit an air of confidence that can only be described as strutting. I use the word “werk” to describe Johnny Weir because of his fierce commitment to being himself and the labor he does to overcome social constructions of gender, particularly through his delivery. I use this term to signify that I am not talking about work in the sense of labor, but instead as a fierce commitment to self and individuality.

Weir’s body is a site of performance that communicates his queerness to disrupt the strict binary of figure skating. By examining Weir’s costume choices, song choices, routines, and body movements, I argue Weir “werks” from the margins of sport to disrupt gender. I identify the margin in this sense as the sport of figure skating because it is a sport that never sees the popularity of football, basketball, or baseball, with the exception of Olympic coverage every four years. Even still, the sport receives significantly less coverage and publicity than others in the same period. Furthermore, figure skating is a sport where identity is continually policed and disciplined by athletes, fans, and governing bodies. In his analysis of Johnny Weir, Brandon Bumstead (2011) argues that Weir’s queer potential is stifled by “multiple forms of discipline

that include juxtaposition, appropriation, metaphor, humor and dismissal” (p. 75). Through a variety of mediated sources, Weir’s identity is continuously compared to more rigidly masculine skaters like Evan Lysacek, or dismissed as a laughable character and not a serious athlete. Despite making the argument that Weir’s queer potential is stifled by the media, Bumstead does suggest that, “Weir still brings something very interesting to the world of athletics in that he so outwardly enacts queer potential” (p. 75). He furthers, “Perhaps then, the disciplining of Weir works to prove his own subject position,” (p. 75) and therefore, “Weir’s “weirdness” can potentially expand audience perceptions of gender and sexuality regardless of the disciplining mechanisms seen in the discourse” (p. 75). I wish to take up this argument about Weir’s queer potential by approaching his performances as a form of queer performative discourse that redefines athleticism.

Weir’s performances and costume choices articulate his queerness from within the sport, utilizing both space and genre as modes of delivery. This is seen in the way Weir crafts his performances, including song choice, costume design, and choreography. For Weir, more than most male skaters, these choices play a major role his identity. Weir’s rival, Evan Lysacek, made an argument for removing costumes and music from the sport in order to focus on athleticism. Weir, however, explained that without the costumes he would do another sport (Caple, 2010). Together, the costumes, music, and artistic routines make figure skating as much of an art form as a professional sport. For Weir, and many other skaters, this involves making an argument about their understanding of masculinity. Given figure skating’s fetish with making the activity more macho (Adams, 2011), it makes sense that figure skaters are forced to reaffirm their masculinity through performance. In an interview with *ESPN’s Outside the Lines (OTL)*, Johnny Weir explains,

For me, I'm lucky that I've traveled so much of the world and seen so many things and for me, masculinity is completely subjective. Here, a male ballet dancer would get beat up and left on the side of the road. But in Russia, he is No. 1, he is what a man is. That kind of passion and control. In Japan, masculinity is making sure your hair is completely gelled and coiffed and that you're dressed and decked to the nines. Masculinity is what you make it out to be. Here in the U.S., not everyone feels the same way. (Caple, 2010)

As Weir echoes here, the performance of gender is bound up in cultural understandings of masculinity and femininity. Figure skating is as much about performing gender as it is about performing an athletic routine. Using Weir's larger body of work and performance, I argue that he purposefully calls attention to his body and ambiguous sexuality to disrupt gender in sport. In order to effectively analyze Weir's performance of gender, I examine three of Johnny Weir's routines from 2006-2010, including his 2006 short program, his 2010 free skate, and an exhibition skate from 2010.

### ***2006 Short Program***

At the 2006 Olympic games in Torino, Italy Johnny Weir skated to a short program he titled "The Swan," named after the Camille Saint-Saëns chamber piece, *The Carnival of Animals* (1887). The short program is the first of two elements in a sanctioned figure skating competition, and is judged on two separate categories: the technical element score and the program component score. As part of the routine, competitors are required to complete eight elements, which include three spins, three jumps, and two-step sequences (Hines, 2011). In order to move on to the next round of the competition, the skater must deliver a strong short program. At just over two minutes, the short program can make or break a skater's medal contention, particularly in the Olympics. I chose this routine for analysis because it was the first time Johnny Weir

appeared in the Olympic games, and thus it is the first time a majority of the world would see him perform. This is important for two crucial reasons. First, the international stage given to Johnny Weir creates a platform for his queer performance gender and athleticism. Second, this routine offers a point of comparison to routines that come later in his career.

Weir's 2006 short program begins with him gliding to the center of the ice as he prepares for the music to begin. For most of the public at home watching the Olympic games, this would be the first time they would see Weir perform. Consequently, many did not know what to expect. This was not the case for avid followers of the figure skating community who had watched Weir dedicate his life to this moment. While he is moving to his starting position, the camera shows the applause and enthusiasm from the audience, particularly from his fan section known as "Johnny's Angels." Even in 2006, Weir had created a large fan following because of his authentic skating style and large personality. Today, Weir's fan base remains stronger than ever as Weir superfans follow his career religiously. As *Bustle* writer Torey Van Oot (2018) notes, "'WEIRDos,' as Weir fans sometimes refer to themselves, have flooded Facebook pages and forums dedicated to his career, created *Tumblr* shrines to his outfit choices, and sketched fabulous fan art" (para. 4). These fans have been there since the very beginning, recognizing the authenticity and uniqueness of a figure skater like Johnny Weir. The applause from his fan base sets the tone for Weir's entrance on to the ice, creating energy for Weir's performance to build upon, much like the applause given to welcome a prominent speaker onto a stage. This crowd is here for Johnny Weir and they expect a show. This context helps to define the *topos* of genre, or the space in which Weir is performing. According to Werner (2017), it is important that rhetorical scholars consider the social context in which a rhetorical action is performed. As a mode of delivery, Weir's performance is guided by the context in which it is

delivered, including the space, the audience, and his body. On one hand, Weir's performance is delivered within the space of the Olympic games and the regulations of the International Skating Union (ISU). Weir is competing as an athlete and must conform to their regulations in order to win. Therefore, how he crafts his short program routine could be drastically different than an exhibition skate because the context changes. On the other hand, the presence of Weir's superfans alters the physical space in which Weir performs, calling for Weir to deliver a performance that is as unique as his personality. This juxtaposition of contexts reflects the constitutive nature of genre that is professional figure skating and gives insight into the relationship between space, body, and audience.

Once Weir reaches his starting position, he strikes an opening pose through the contortion of his body and waits for the music to begin. In this moment, Weir's body and persona become the main focus as we see him balancing on one blade with the other crossed behind his leg, using the toe pick for support. Weir's arms are away from his body, but still lowered and slightly bent, like a bird waiting to take flight. His head is tilted down and time seems to stop as the audience waits. His face is lightly accentuated by makeup; small amounts of foundation and blush that accentuate his feminine features and highlight his face. The posture that Weir takes here is reminiscent of a ballerina waiting to leap across the stage. In this moment Weir looks both innocent and vulnerable, two traits that would perfectly describe the prima ballerina of any company, but a straight male athlete would scoff at. Also in this opening pose, we are drawn to the costume Weir has chosen for the short program routine. Johnny Weir's performance choices have always been known for their artistry and dramatic flair, and most notable is the evolution of his costumes, which deviate from those worn both other American skaters in particular. Weir's costumes cover a wide range of gendered fashions from lace up corsets to Russian fur hats to

Lady Gaga-esque body suits. This particular costume is majestic in that it resembles a swan, positioned from the tip of his right hand moving across his torso. The feathers are white, silver, and tan and cover his right arm, shoulder, and upper torso. Below the feathers, his costume gives way to solid black pants that blend with his black skates; single feathers fall down his left leg. His left arm features an open shoulder with crisscross black lines running down to his hand. All of this is designed to accentuate the head of the swan, which is located on his right hand, an orange glove he has named “Camille” after the composer Camille Saint-Saëns. Weir’s creation of Camille was actually a spur of the moment decision following the 2005 Grand Prix (Weir, 2011). The choice of costume illustrates how Weir interacts with the music, the athletic elements of figure skating, and even the ice rink where he skates.

Camille is the focal point of Weir’s short program and sets the tone for his entire performance by creating a persona for Weir to embody. As a unique element, Camille helps Johnny to “werk” his routine as if she has a mind of her own, emphasizing Weir’s persona. Camille leads Johnny Weir around the ice like a swan gliding across the water, reflecting the movement of chords and notes in the music. Weir’s arms move fluidly around his body, in a way that is more reminiscent of fellow female skaters than the men he is competing against. Instead, each movement flows in to the next, creating a stunning visual display. While many male skaters move quickly from element to element, Weir takes his time, using his body to convey an emotional message. The gloved hand of Camille helps him to begin the routine as the music drifts through the arena. Weir’s arms begin to flap and he tiptoes away from his starting position. As Weir moves around the ice, Camille leading him, he gracefully moves towards the first of his three jumps, a flawless triple axel. The triple axel is the only jump that is approached from a front-facing position. The remaining six figure skating jumps are approached from a rear-facing

position. Weir's triple axel elicits a round of applause from the audience, signifying a successful feat of athleticism. This first jump is important because it brings Weir back in to the realm of masculine athleticism. While Weir's costume draws on feminine styling and cuts, the triple axel shows his masculine power. We watch as his body tenses, his legs bend, and he spins through the air, landing on one single skate.

Weir continues to “werk” through his routine, executing the required elements of the short program and maintains a confident strut throughout. For Weir, the ice is his runway and every element is completed with a fierce commitment that helps to complete the showmanship of the performance. For example, he completes a triple lutz – triple toe loop combo jump before a death drop – cannon ball – pancake spin. These spins show off Weir's flexibility: he bends low on his left leg, bringing the right skate and leg up to meet his torso. Flexibility, often seen as something required of a female gymnast or dancer, is not a term associated with masculine athleticism. Male athletes are expected to be strong and tough, not soft and flexible. As the spin continues, we see Camille rise from his back, as if a swan was spinning on the ice and not Johnny Weir. The illusion is striking, adding a unique visual element to the routine that shifts focus away from strict masculine athleticism. Moving out of the spin, Weir moves around the ice, again “werking” his personal runway. To fill the space in between required elements, Weir relies on artistic choreography that is punctuated with dramatic sweeps of the arms and strategic movements of the gloved hand, Camille. All of Weir's body movements are designed to accentuate the artistry of his routine and the majestic costume he is wearing, all of which feed the persona of the routine. These artistic moments help to hide the athleticism of the routine, removing the element of sport for the viewing audience. While other male skaters, American in particular, focus on the power of their jumps and the speed of their spins, Weir delivers an



aesthetic routine that relies on the artistry of his body. Weir makes the routine look effortless as he moves from skill to skill, crafting a unique story with this short program, engaging with the tension between artistry and athleticism. Aesthetically, Weir uses his body to create and deliver a particular feeling for his audience. The routine conveys grace and beauty, which are projected on to Weir's personality.

As the program continues, Weir works in his first required circular step sequence, which includes a left forward inside rocker, a Choctaw, a left back outside double twizzle, an outside Mohawk, a left forward inside double twizzle, a left forward inside bracket, a right back outside bracket, and a right back inside counter. This footwork moves him around the ice, using artistic movements of the body to continue the swan illusion. Weir even works in more movements of the arm to resemble the flight of the swan. Following this footwork sequence, Weir completes a triple flip jump, which earns bonus points for appearing this late in the routine. However, Weir visibly struggles with the landing of the jump, despite successfully completing it. This jump is followed by another spin combo, which consists of a forward sitting cannonball changing into a sit-back pancake spin. Finally, Weir skates through a last straight line footwork set before he comes into his final spins. This footwork is punctuated by a moment where Weir appears at the end of the rink, bouncing on the toe picks of his skates, creating a dramatic moment that moves him to the center of the ice for his final spin, which consists of a camel spin sitting into a cannonball position before changing feet into a back bielman and royal- back "I" spin. These spins bring Weir into final pose of his routine; reminiscent of the way he began. Weir finds himself balancing on his left leg, his right wrapped behind him. He flutters his arms like a bird coming in to land as Camille reaches over to caress the side of his face. In this moment in

particular, the “werk” that Weir has done to craft his aesthetic performance is clear. From beginning to end, the routine told a story; a story that cannot possibly be told in gendered terms.

Following the routine, Weir shows very little emotion, which is a distinct contrast from the emotional performance of the routine. The moment he breaks from his final position, the illusion of the Camille persona is shattered. This break in emotion removes Weir from the genre of the delivery; we remember that this is not an artistic performance, but a competitive event. In a reflexive ethnography of his participation in a gay rowing club, Gareth Owen (2006) argues, “The visibility of gay men in sport might indeed trouble the normative equation of ‘athleticism=masculinity=heterosexuality’, but hegemonic masculinity is still reproduced by the mandatory performance of *competitive* masculinities in conventional sport” (p. 142). When the camera pans out to a chanting group of American fans waving signs and flags, the genre shifts back to that of a competitive sport while Weir is still on the ice taking his bows. He skates off looking tired and disappointed in a routine that he knows he needed to do better with in order to place higher. Visually, Weir delivered a performance that was artistically masterful and told a story about grace and strength. Placed in a genre of artistry, such as that of ballet, Weir’s performance of gender is expected. Even in the sport of figure skating Weir’s performance is hardly a transgression. However, because the *topos* of space positions Weir’s queer body within a competitive and masculine environment, Weir’s performance challenges understandings of gender and its relationship to athleticism. Because men’s figure skating is a product of binary understandings of sex and gender and sport, male figure skaters are expected to perform athleticism in a masculine way. Weir pushes back against this assumption, exposing the limits of gender through performance.

## ***2010 Free Skate***

At the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver, Canada Weir gave arguably one of the best performances of his career during a free skate routine titled “Fallen Angel.” The free skate is the second required skate of a sanctioned figure skating competition. During the Olympic games the free skate is comprised of the top 24 skaters following the short program. Unlike the short program, the free skate has no required elements, but instead has “prescribed limitations” that the skaters must adhere to (Hines, 2011, p. 34). For example, in men’s single’s skating, higher technical scores are given if jumps are completed in the second half of the routine. Weir’s free skate during the 2010 Olympic games takes advantage of the new scoring system that blends the athletic and aesthetic elements of the performance. Whereas the short program from the Torino Olympics displayed an effortless and artistic interpretation of the music, the 2010 free skate tells a story. Written to reflect his own career, the “Fallen Angel” routine draws on music from the *City of Angels* soundtrack by Gabriel Yared and “Nocturne,” from *The Lady Caliph* by Ennio Morricone. The music and choreography of the routine recreate the drama of Johnny Weir’s own career by featuring multiple shifts in tone and style to represent the ups and downs of his skating career. I chose this routine for two particular reasons. First, as a free skate, Johnny Weir received praise for his artistic elements and the clean jumps, but was also highly criticized for omitting the quad jump that so many male skaters were turning to. Second, a free skate such as this offers Weir more room to interpret the music both through artistry and emotion.

The start of the broadcast begins with a shot of Weir talking to his coach in Russian. The *NBC* commentator points out that Weir and his coach, Galina Zmievskaya, are speaking Russian, which Weir has learned over the years (Trofimova, 2011). Johnny Weir has commented on his obsession with everything Russian, identifying himself as self-proclaimed Russophile (Weir,

2011). Drawing on the inherent difference created by the use of language, the male broadcaster for *NBC* moves into commentary about not knowing what to expect from Johnny Weir and that “he is a free spirit” (Trofimova, 2011). Again, Weir is faced with competing genres of delivery, defined by multiple audiences. Given the prescribed rules and limitations of the free skate, figure skaters are expected to compete to win, an inherently masculine view of athleticism. However, as these comments suggest, Weir challenges this notion of gendered athleticism, relying on the artistry and aesthetic performance of his routine. Webster argues that female athletes in particular are often marginalized by discussions of style and aesthetics. She argues, “Emphasizing style over athleticism denies female athletes of their skills, strength, and accomplishments” (2009, p. 57). Weir is in a unique position to frame feminine discourses of style and aesthetics as a way of enhancing his own performance of gender and athleticism.

As Weir finishes talking to his coach he skates to the center of the ice, the camera following as he circles his starting position. As he prepares for the music to begin, Weir plants his weight on his left skate, allowing his right leg to balance on the toe of his skate. His arms are slightly away from his sides and he stares defiantly forwards. Here we are given a full view of his free skate costume, which features large feathers and a shear top that give way to solid black pants. Both the front and the back of the outfit have deep “V” formations that reveal his slender, but toned figure. The “V” portions are filled with nude fabric to ensure the costume covers at least 50% of the body, an ISU rule. The torso of the costume is adorned with feathers, arranged to resemble a wing that wraps across the front of his body. The opposite side of the wing is marked with solid white lines that look like ribs of a shirtless angel. The sparkling white of the torso continues down his arms to cover both hands in white gloves. Like the costume from the 2006 short program, this costume also plays with the boundaries of gender. Whereas male

skaters, American skaters in particular, have embraced the “macho turn” of figure skating that brought strength and power back to the sport by limiting costumes and focusing on jumps (Adams, 2011), Weir fully embraces the dramatic flair of sequins and sparkles that work to create an aesthetic performance. As an articulation of gender, Weir’s costuming flirts with the lines of drag or camp and adds to his unique persona. The use of over-the-top costume elements turns Weir’s costume into a parody of those traditionally worn by male skaters. In this way, Weir becomes a parody or caricature of a male figure skater.

The camera zooms in on Weir’s face, which is soft and pale, almost elfish. His makeup is done subtly, but still noticeable when the camera comes to focus on his face. Despite the subtle use of makeup, it is still evident on Weir’s face and reinforces the artistic and fluid persona of the routine. When the music begins, Weir moves from his starting position to set up his first jump, a quad flip. He throws his head back, raises his arms, and skates backwards away from the center of the ice. As he skates, the music starts out light with church bells clanging in the background. Approaching the first jump, the commentators can be heard discussing the need for Weir to complete the quad jump. Instead, Weir attempts only a triple flip jump and lands it with ease. The decision to do so reflects Weir’s commitment to clean and artistic skating, rather than the use of power. Using the space of the ice, Weir glides between jumps, hitting a triple axel and a triple Salchow. This final section is punctuated with a beautifully executed triple axel – double toe loop combo. Between each jump, Weir relies on his body to convey the emotion reflected in the song, an element that adds to the persona. Throughout most of the performance, including this first section, Weir displays a softness that is not traditionally seen in male skaters. There is no rugged masculinity in his performance like that of rival Evan Lysacek. Of Weir and Lysacek he *New York Times* writes,

One stands 6 feet 2 inches; wears panther black and dates ESPN's Hottest Female Athlete. The other weighs an avian 125 pounds, favors sequined swan outfits and coyly brushes off pater about his sexuality. One skates with precision and adrenalized power, wants figure skating in the X Games and wears several days of stubble during competitions. The other adores skating's operatic performances, is asked if his eyelashes are real and announces that they are. (Schwarz, 2008, paras. 1-2)

Weir's routine can only be classified as artistic and beautiful, which is a stark contrast from the rugged and macho routines of Lysacek. The contrasting elements of masculinity and femininity, aggressive jumps mixed with feminine movements and styling, allow Weir to deliver a critically queer performance driven by a fluid performance of athleticism.

As thunder strikes over the music the tempo changes and Weir's pace picks up as he moves into his first spin sequence, a death drop pancake spin, which contorts his body, "werking" his moment in the spotlight. The music continues to pick up a dramatic pace as Weir completes a step sequence, ending in an emotional moment where he is stationary on the ice before resuming skating. Here, the music slows again as he prepares for a triple loop jump. The move is executed flawlessly as Weir works his body and reaches for the sky in dramatic fashion. Moving into the period of the routine where jumps are awarded bonus points, Weir completes two combination jumps: a triple lutz followed by a triple toe loop and a triple lutz followed by two double toe loop jumps. These athletic achievements earn him praise from the broadcasters, who comment on the power of his jumps and the cleanliness of his landing, which reinforce the competitive nature of men's figure skating. As if Weir recognizes this masculine praise he has received, the routine shifts tone, allowing Weir to draw on more artistic and inherently feminine elements. The fluidity of Weir's gender is very apparent in this moment, highlighting Weir's

ability to “werk” as a performer. This third and final section of the program features another music shift with the church bells sounding. The audience begins to clap along with the music, urging Weir’s performance on. Weir completes an artistic spin sequence and a skilled footwork technique working his way across the ice. Each of these is done so smoothly and effortlessly that it seems no strength or stamina is required allowing Weir to strut across the ice to his ending position where he finishes with a final spin sequence. The performance ends with Weir clutching his chest, clear emotions on his face from completing a flawless routine. This free skate is exemplary of Weir’s ability to “werk” as a performer, using elements of femininity and masculinity in ways other skaters cannot or will not.

### ***2010 Exhibition Skate***

Following the 2010 United States National Figure Skating Championships, Johnny Weir performed his now legendary program to Lady Gaga’s “Poker Face.” Exhibition skates generally take place following a competition, allowing winning skaters to showcase their various talents. Weir uses this space to “werk” the ice, as if he is giving his own pop concert in front of millions of fans. No longer is Weir confined to a small runway; now he has the entire stage. It is fitting that Weir is using the music of Lady Gaga for his exhibition skate because Lady Gaga is also known for transgressing social constructions of gender. J. Jack Halberstam (2012) articulates this performance style as “gaga feminism.” According to Halberstam (2012),

Gaga feminism, or the feminism (pheminism?) of the phony, the unreal, and the speculative, is simultaneously a monstrous outgrowth of the unstable concept of ‘woman’ in feminist theory, a celebration of the joining of femininity to artifice, and a refusal of the mushy sentimentalism that has been siphoned into the category of womanhood. (pp. xii-xiii)

Johnny Weir, like Lady Gaga, represents a form of feminism that draws on the emerging formulations of gender politics in an age where femininity is performed in innovative ways by pop culture sensations that push bodily identity to the extremes. As one commentator notes prior to performance, “You never know what to expect from Johnny Weir.” True to form, the exhibition skate did not lack any of his traditional flair and still stands out as one of the most iconic performances of his career. An exhibition skate, unlike the short program and free skate, has no required elements, and offers more freedom to the skater. This particular skate is important because it overlaps with Weir’s “Fallen Angel” free skate program during the 2009-2010 competitive season, and was performed because of Weir’s bronze medal finish at the US Championships. In contrast to the artistry and beauty of the free skate, this exhibition skate is exciting, creative, and draws on the campiness of drag.

As Weir moves to the ice the audience is confronted with his costume, which is reminiscent of a woman’s lace up corset, with shiny silver material down one arm that turned to black gloves on both hands. The look is accentuated by Lady Gaga-esque make up; around one eye, black lines create a large outline, accentuating the shape of the eye. The other eye is surrounded by light blue streaks above and below. Unlike the costumes of the short program and the free skate, this costume creates a distinctly feminine, but fluid persona. Weir removes any suggestion of masculinity, save for his participation in the men’s category. The combination of costume and make up are bordering on the edges of drag, and draw humor from the campiness of the whole thing. Reina Green (2017) argues that exaggerated performances of gender, such as masculinity and heteronormativity, can introduce a camp aesthetic into figure skating. In her analysis of Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir’s rendition of *Funny Face*, Green (2017) examines how skaters draw on camp performances, particularly in their exhibition skates, because of how



rigidly gender is controlled within the sport. Weir also takes advantage of this moment to deliver a fluid gender performance that challenges the ridged gender norms of the sport. This begins the moment he enters the rink, when the lights are turned low to reveal ice that is multicolored and fabulous, with a spotlight positioned on Weir in the center of the ice. Weir's costume is the key to the queerness of the performance as it pushes back against everything we think we know about the gendered nature of figure skating. Weir's embodied performance of gender reveals the tension between the corporeality of his body and the social constructions of men's figure skating.

Finding the center of the ice, Weir takes his starting position. He lowers himself to the ice, placing both legs to the left side of his body. He leans on his right hand, wrapping his left behind him. The music begins and screams come from the audience as they recognize the song choice. He raises his left hand and brings it straight down, past his face, lowering himself fully to the ice. As he pulls himself up, he spins on his knees, and drops low in a pelvic thrust, followed by a rolling of the shoulders to the music. More than anything, Weir embodies the essence of Lady Gaga and gaga feminism as he dances to the music on ice, drawing on innovative performances of identity. He is extravagant and excessive and draws on the fame of Lady Gaga to make statement about his own identity. Standing up, Weir starts his routine by dancing, moving rhythmically on the ice to the music. He uses his hands and arms to accentuate his movements, much in the same way a dancer would perform on stage during a concert. These slight movements of the hands and arms, as well as the movement of the body accentuate the softness and femininity of the routine, but also elicit a sexual vibe. Weir rolls his body, showing off his slender, yet toned figure. He places his hands on hips in the classic feminine display, arching the back. Tyra Banks, a former model and host of *America's Next Top Model*, would call this a "booty-tooch," a modeling position she has famously incorporated into her reality

competition. As competitors on the show, these models are required to “werk” their body and the runway by conforming to gendered expectations of the ideal man or woman. The “booty tooch” is one way that female models emphasize their femininity by accentuating their backside. Weir uses this same technique to accentuate his own body, drawing our attention to the natural curves of the back and hips.

In this routine, Weir only completes one jump, a triple flip. The remainder of the routine is comprised of spins and footwork sequences that fit with the pop music of Lady Gaga. He even manages to work in a signature move simply known as “the Weir,” which consists of Weir sliding across the ice on his knees. This move is equal parts masculine sex appeal and feminine submission. As Weir slides, his head is thrown back and both hands are on the ice above his head. As he slides across the ice, his knees and pelvis lead the way. The lack of visibly athletic elements such as jumps further removes the masculinity from Weir’s routine. While skating itself is an athletic accomplishment, the visible jumps in a routine look more athletic than spins or footwork. By removing the focus from the jumps and placing it on these artistic elements, Weir obfuscates the complexity of what he is doing. To the typical viewer, this looks more like a dance routine than an athletic performance, and because a male skater’s identity is tied to his jumps, Weir is not performing masculinity. Instead, Weir displays his artistry throughout the performance. His mix of dance movements with figure skating elements signifies his fluid persona as a skater. His comic shoulder shimmies add to the queer persona of a man dressed in corset skating across the ice. It is this juxtaposition of body and space that draws attention to the difference of Weir. According to Butler (1993), “Indeed, it may be precisely through practices which underscore disidentification with those regulatory norms by which sexual difference is materialized that both feminist and queer politics are mobilized” (p. 4). Johnny Weir’s queer

body purposefully challenges what it means to be a male figure skater by playing with notions of body and persona in the space of male athletics. It can be argued that Weir is domesticated by the sport and commentary; however, I argue that his body represents queer potential to reframe the relationship between gender and athleticism.

## **Conclusion**

This case study has examined how Johnny Weir's fluid performance of gender and athleticism challenges the binary nature of gender in sport.. Through an analysis of three of his figure skating routines, I argue that Weir uses his embodied sporting performance to rearticulate athleticism as distinct from social constructions of gender, particularly when forms of athleticism are gendered as masculine or feminine. Johnny Weir is what gender performance in sport could/should/would be like if we deconstructed the binary nature, particularly on an individual level, allowing athletes to perform gender outside of the regulatory norms of gendered sport. In many ways, Weir has resisted conforming, but in other ways he is limited, particularly as he is contained within a sport that is already known for alternative forms of masculinity. However, I argue that Weir is exemplar of what a queer athleticism looks like and what his queerness exposes about sport. He relies on the fluidity of gender to challenge the binary model of sport. As an embodied performance of athleticism, Weir challenges the notion of athletic genders and disrupts the notion that athleticism can/should be gendered. Delivery as a critical methodology reveals how Weir's performances create a unique identity that is rooted in normalized assumptions of gender. Much like burlesque, Weir "makes the spectacular out of the mundane" (Werner, 2017, p. 56). Furthermore, Johnny Weir "werks" to make each performance memorable by drawing on the queer elements of movement, body, and persona. His performances rely on queer elements of fashion, styling, and movement that expose the limits of gendered sport by

calling attention to the arbitrary categories of competition that are predicated on social constructions of sex and gender. Each performance is authentic and unique, created specifically for Johnny Weir. Finally, Weir commits to each routine and moves through them with a fierce strut to back up each performance choice.

We should recognize Weir's potential to disrupt the strict binary that drives sports in the United States and ties athleticism to specific performances of gender. In the conclusion of *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler clarifies that drag is not by any means exemplary of performativity, but instead is one way of understanding the performativity and the reiteration of gender. Butler argues that drag is important for understanding performativity because Butler (1993) explains, "What drag exposes, however, is the "normal" constitution of gender presentation in which the gender performed is in many ways constituted by a set of disavowed attachments or identifications that constitute a different domain of the "unperformable" (p. 180). By no means do I argue that Weir is performing drag or that Weir's performances are exemplary of performativity. However, I do argue that by understanding Weir's performances as parody or camp, Weir exposes the limits of gendered sport. Each performance relies on interactions between the genre, body/persona, space, and audience. Through a framework of delivery, Weir challenges the commitment to gendered category of sports and articulates a queer athleticism. By this I mean that Weir is drawing on the fluidity of gender in order to create routine that is equal parts athletic and artistic. In doing so, Weir parodies the gendered (masculine) performances of male figure skaters. Much like a drag queen exposes the performativity of womanhood, so too does Weir expose the performativity of gendered athleticism. Athleticism cannot have a gender, yet society has come to craft athleticism in conjunction with gender. Understanding the ways in

which Weir parodies constructions of gendered athleticism exposes the limits of such a configuration.

In 2014, after retiring from the sport of figure skating, Johnny Weir went on tour with “Artistry on Ice,” a figure skating company touring in China. In addition to a solo skate, Weir performed in a ground-breaking male-male pairs skate with Chinese skater Zhang Hao. Weir and Zhang skated to the song “When Love is Gone” from the Chinese film “Farewell my Concubine,” a 1993 Chinese drama that tells the tale of a forbidden relationship between two male opera performers. Following the original plot of the movie, Weir plays an opera singer that was trained as a female performer, in this case the concubine of the Conqueror. When the music begins, Weir skates on to empty ice wearing a cheongsam, a traditional Chinese dress, over a white Chinese styled top and pants. Taking a large part in the creation of the performance, Weir helped to design the look with the help of original composer and singer of the song, Jonathan Lee. Blending ancient Chinese Culture with Western culture, Weir adds a unique element to the performance. Ironically, Weir remains wearing black skates, a signature of male skaters. As Weir skates across the ice he throws the multicolored cheongsam off, and dramatically skates away from his fellow skater. The Conqueror comes to the ice following Weir and grasps his hands from behind. Together, the pair skates around the ice, culminating in a powerful throw of Weir across the ice. At one point, Zhang caresses Weir’s face in a symbolic gesture of love and caring. Ultimately, the performance is about Weir’s character. The performance ends with the Conqueror putting the cheongsam back around Weir’s shoulders and the pair stopping mid ice. The performance makes Weir the object of desire, highlighting his beauty, flexibility, and body. The light follows him around the ice reflecting his position as object. There are tender moments of desire as the Conqueror caresses and embraces the Concubine. Another poignant moment is

when Weir comes sliding across the ice, in his signature move, to the Conqueror who is watching from a far. The story represents queer love and desire in a way that is undeniable. I highlight this skate as an example of queer athleticism because Weir, despite being retired, is still an athlete who is capable of amazing athletic feats. However, this example signifies the limitations of allowing cultural assumptions of gender to permeate sport.

As an athlete, Weir is in a unique position to challenge the binary gender system of sport through embodied performances of gender that engage the relationship between corporeality, embodied self, and the social world of regulatory bodies. As a queer body in a male sport, Weir's embodied performance demonstrates the limits of gender, even if he finds himself contained in a sport on the margins like men's figure skating, where identity is already questioned and policed. A queer approach to sport communication deconstructs the hegemonic structures of gendered sports in order to disengage athleticism from conversations of gender. As Weir's performances articulate, athleticism itself is an identity and can exist separate from understandings of gender.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

#### **Summary**

In 2017, over 1,000 LGBTQ athletes traveled to Washington, D.C. to participate in the fourth annual Stonewall Sports National Tournament, which offers competition in sports such as dodgeball, kickball, and volleyball (Fulkerson, n.d.). As an organization, Stonewall Sports is an LGBTQ and Ally not-for-profit sports league that fosters inclusion and diversity in sport. Their mission is to foster athletic competition in a fun and inclusive environment, recognizing that LGBTQ individuals like sports just as much as their heterosexual counterparts. The spirit of these events is about inclusion, reflecting a need to move away from the male-centered and hegemonic versions of sport, which privilege domination, strength, and competition. As a grass roots sport organization, the Stonewall Sport National Tournament attempts to subvert mainstream sport culture by fostering a competition space that allows anyone to participate. In contrast to the small scale of the Stonewall Games, the widely popular and well-known Gay Games host competition in a larger variety of sporting events. Created in 1982 as a response to problems with the Olympics, the Gay Games represent a cultural event that promotes the spirit of inclusion and participation in sport. Some have argued that the Gay Games represent a commodification of sport, particularly as more LGBTQ individuals find their home in sport (see Symons, 2010); however, as Caroline Symons articulates in a historical account of the Gay Games,

Whilst the Gay Games have had a mainstreaming emphasis, they have also been

envisaged as a 'radical' alternative to conventional sporting events and practices.

Representations and embodiment of sport, sex, gender, sexuality, and community appear to be played out at the Gay Games in challenging as well as conventional ways. Their affirming sporting and cultural environment for LGBTIQ peoples and their potential resistance to the gender order make the Gay Games a significant event. (2010, p. 2)

The tension between disruption and boundary maintenance is of critical importance to a rhetorical project that approaches sport from a queer perspective. As Symons argues of the very first Gay Games, the gender conservatism is well documented; "To prove that the Gay Games was a legitimate event and that gay people were 'normal', certain sections of the gay and lesbian community were excluded from the event and/or flamboyant and explicitly sexual behaviors were censored (i.e. wearing leather regalia, wearing/performing drag)" (2010, p. 243). Despite these shaky roots, the Gay Games offer queer potential for "critiquing and contesting heterosexist traditions in sport" (Symons, 2010, p. 244). It is through alternative ways of doing sport, such as Stonewall Sports and the Gay Games that the queer potential for sport to destabilize social institutions of sex and gender is realized. The future of sport is queer and this dissertation is but one small piece highlighting how individual athletes, sports, and narratives can challenge binary assumptions of sport.

In the introductory chapter to this dissertation, I joined a scholarly conversation about how queer theory can help to inform research on sport and gender, which positions difference as an unstable differential relation. A queer body of scholarship on communication and sport looks for places where we can productively use sport myths, narratives, and structures to deconstruct a way of doing sport that is predicated on a socially constructed gender binary. Sociology scholars such as Jayne Caudwell (2006) and Heather Sykes (2006) argue that queer theory has the



potential to change the way we do sport research because it “has the potential to alter how we think about sexualities, desires, and bodies” (Sykes, 2006, p. 26). Furthermore, Corey W. Johnson and Beth Kivel argue that those interested in sport “might use queer theory to extend our examinations of leisure and sport constraints to explore how power relations reflect issues of negation (control and evading control) in leisure and sport” (2007, p. 103). The role that sport plays in constituting society allows for an examination of the performance of gender identity in a hyper visual setting. For LGBTQ athletes, sport represents a place where their identities are continually challenged because they do not fit perceived social norms and are always under constant surveillance. When places in sport emerge that embrace difference, particularly in support of the LGBTQ community, they are celebrated for their commitment to diversity and inclusion. Positioned against binary assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality, these case studies have the potential to expose the limits of that discourse in sport. Therefore, it is important to question how these spaces function to disrupt discourse. In this dissertation, I have argued that although there are places in sport that function as antagonisms and unstable differential relations that disrupt binary structures, to some extent, they are still bound by them. As I demonstrated with both the sport of quidditch and the *Outsports* website, gender norms are constantly policed by the sport community and work to establish difference as a determinate identity. Consequently, LGBTQ bodies are disciplined by binary understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality in sport. It is because of this, the tension between disruption and discipline, that we are able to deconstruct identity. The three case studies that I have analyzed all represent the tension between disruption and reification of binary assumptions of gender. As I have shown, these case studies form a contemporary sport context that works to disrupt sport from the margins by articulating moments of queer potential.

Chapter two engaged with the ways in which LGBTQ sport media and journalism disrupt binary assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality in the sport-media complex. Using the top 25 most-read stories posted to *Outsports* in 2017, I argue that the *Outsports* website functions as a sport media site that has the potential to queer gender and athleticism in sport through the use of narratives. In this chapter, I identified three narratives utilized by *Outsports*, which include the Authentic Identity narrative, the Athletic Success narrative, and the Social Acceptance Narrative. In concluding this chapter, I evaluated the queer potential of the narratives outside the context of *Outsports*, suggesting the narratives may be so normative that they remove any threat to the binary structures of sport. From this, I draw two conclusions. First, the narratives created by *Outsports* risk normalizing LGBTQ identities by packaging them in ways that are easily accepted and non-threatening. In an attempt to shift the focus of sport from being all about “straight men liking sports” *Outsports* has simply made it about “gay men liking sports,” marginalizing the rest of the LGBTQ community. Second, the queer potential of *Outsports* can only be realized when mainstream media and journalism outlets repost stories written by *Outsports*, which implicate media outlets in their own hegemonic practices.

In chapter three I examined the potential for quidditch to disrupt the gender binary that sport is predicated upon. As a sport, quidditch creates a space that allows athletes to perform gender and athleticism in fluid ways. In an attempt to keep the game true to the writings of Rowling, women and men play on the same team and there are no gendered categories for participation. Gender identity and regulation is guided by the US Quidditch Association’s Title IX  $\frac{3}{4}$  rule, which maintains a gender maximum during play, while also recognizing that gender is not limited to the binaries of male and female. Despite this commitment, there are many instances where quidditch reifies binary gender norms, particularly through the use of aggression

and similar performances of masculinity. And yet, individual athletes are able to articulate moments of queer potential through embodied performances of athleticism that destabilize gender. Using rhetorical field methods, I argue that the sport of quidditch has the potential to function as a queer sport that disrupts gender by allowing athletes to perform and construct athleticism in the absence of binary sport categories. More specifically, the potential to be a queer sport happens through the creation of a queer performance space and through queer embodiment of athleticism. Through a rearticulation of athleticism as separate from gender, quidditch players are opening new possibilities for performances of athleticism. Additionally, the sport is creating spaces for individuals who do not conform to social constructions of gender to participate in sport. Stemming from the fictional world of the *Harry Potter* universe, the sport of quidditch offers a haven for individuals to participate in sport that fosters inclusion and diversity.

In chapter four, I examined how individual athletes can disrupt social constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality by performing gender in fluid ways within the context of sport. Individual athletes have the ability to challenge hegemonic structures through individual performances, particularly when those performances are given an international platform such as the Olympics. Johnny Weir is a former Olympic figure skater, and has stood out as both a top men's competitor and as an artistic genius. Figure skating is a sport that has always worked from the margins making it an ideal place to rhetorically analyze athleticism from a queer perspective. Using Johnny Weir as a case study, I applied delivery as a critical methodology to three of his competitive routines during his career. I argue that the performances themselves represent a productive queer performance of gender and athleticism that rearticulates athleticism in queer ways, by drawing on the fluidity of gender. By operationalizing the term "werk," I argue that Johnny Weir delivers an aesthetic performance that rhetorically constructs his identity in queer

ways. As an athlete, Weir is in a unique position to create discourse about embodied performances of gender in sport that engages in the relationship between corporeality, embodied self, and the social world of regulatory bodies. As a queer body in a male sport, Weir's embodied performance demonstrates the limits of gender, even if he finds himself contained in an activity on the margins of sport like figure skating where identity is already questioned and policed.

Taken together, these case studies reveal the ways in which media, sport, and athletes have the potential to queer gender and athleticism by disrupting the binary model of sport. I say potential in this context because that potential may yet be fully realized. Each case study in this dissertation has offered a way of viewing the world of sport that is not tied to binary assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality that divide sport and athleticism into distinct categories. Using these three case studies, it is easy to be optimistic about the future of sport, particularly as athletes, sports, and media work to challenge the many facets of sport. My first instinct when approaching the chapter on quidditch was to say, "Wow! Look at this amazing queer sport!" However, as I have argued, even a sport rooted in magic and fiction cannot escape the clutches of the hegemonic sport culture. Sport is so tied up in American culture that we will likely never see sport escape the chains that bind it to social constructions of sex and gender. Instead, we should look for moments where individual athletes, sports, and spaces disrupt sport. Queer approaches to sport communication have barely scratched the surface of an area that is rich in rhetorical potential. As this dissertation has demonstrated, LGBTQ athletes are working on the margins to disrupt the hegemonic discourses of sport that marginalize LGBTQ identity. What that margin actually looks like has yet to be fully realized, meaning the queer potential of these cases studies are just that, potential. Until these case studies can be viewed as unstable

differential relations, they will remain part of a system that relies on binary assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality.

## **Implications**

This dissertation has revealed the strength of the hegemonic discourses that surround sport, particularly in relation to sex, gender, and sexuality. Despite the queer potential of each case study, the male perspective dominates sports and reinforces the commitment to a gender binary. From a young age, athletes are conditioned to perform athleticism in gendered ways. As Young (1980) argues about young women learning to throw, it is not about physical traits or body composition. Women throw differently because they are taught to do so. The commitment to the gender binary in sport will remain the downfall of most attempts to queer sport because we are always limited to gendered and sexed categories of male and female. This is further compounded by the addition of sexuality to athletic identity. As the narratives used by *Outsports* show, coming out as a gay athlete is not novel or even disruptive. The inclusion of gay athletes into mainstream sports confines sexuality to the already gendered structure of sport. By participating in these hegemonic institutions they are further entrenching the negative impacts of the system, privileging those LGBTQ athletes who can serve as token examples of inclusion. For example, in a symbolic gesture of inclusion, the NHL appointed an LGBTQ-Inclusion ambassador to each team. I say symbolic because the NHL is one sport where no current or former players have come out as LGBTQ (Zeigler, 2017a). With that in mind, I offer three critical implications for this research. First, I argue that these case studies suggest a move towards a queer understanding of athleticism. Second, as I have already eluded to, even in moments of queer resistance, sport still privileges the male identity. Third, I explore the implications of moving sport research into the field. Using the sport of quidditch, I argue that

sport research could benefit from expanding the scope of the text by examining identity construction at the level of performance.

### ***Towards a Queer Athleticism***

A common theme throughout this dissertation has revolved around discussions of athleticism. Each case study highlighted specific ways that media, sport, and athletes work to disrupt sport by challenging the relationship between gender and athleticism. More specifically, I argue that sport is being disrupted on the level of performance by deconstructing the relationship between gender and athleticism. The first major implication of this dissertation is that of queer athleticism. Queer athleticism refers to a performance of athleticism that is not tied to one specific gender, but draws on the fluidity of gender and gender performance. Research in both sport communication and sport sociology has long been concerned with performances of masculinity and femininity, particularly in relation to athleticism. Some scholars have called for the need to examine female athleticism, noting the unique way in which female athletes, and female bodies in particular, demonstrate “how the body becomes the performative site of style, style becomes gendered, and style shapes our ideological views about athleticism, female athletes, and femininity” (Webster, 2009, p. 49; see also Linder, 2011; Malcom, 2003; Mean & Kassing, 2008; Young, 1990). Johnny Weir’s performance of gender is a prime example of what queer athleticism can look like. The ways in which Weir utilizes the fluid elements of gender to craft an artistic performance within a men’s figure skating competition critiques the social construction of sex and gender categories. This is perhaps most prominent in his performance with “Artistry on Ice” where he plays an LGBTQ character from a classic Chinese film. American figure skater Adam Rippon also could represent a productive form of queer

athleticism, sharing many performance qualities with Weir. These examples suggest that queer athleticism is one way to disrupt the hegemonic discourses of sport.

In an attempt to discuss the potential of queer athleticism I first offer an example of how gendered athleticism is maintained even in the queerest spaces. The New York Sharks, a women's tackle football team, is one of 33 teams in the Independent Women's Football League (IWFL). Founded in 1999, the New York Sharks are one of the oldest women's tackle football teams in the United States (Wong, 2017). In addition to the IWFL, the Women's Football League (WFA) 43 teams, making the two organizations the largest football leagues for women in North America. As a sport, women's tackle football surely has the potential to queer sport. Yet, as Bobbi Knapp argues in a feminist interactionist approach to studying women's tackle football, "It was believed that if the women played the game the "right way," no one could question their role as football players, and thus, they would maintain proper face. Here, the "right way" can be read as how men would play the game..." (2014, p. 71). Despite attempts to use football as a source of agency and empowerment, narratives of masculinity and male-domination dominate the sport. Knapp continues, "Such reprimands were verbalized often not only by the coaches but also by other players on the team in an attempt to maintain a unifying expression of a proper football identity which in many ways was unique to this team" (2014, p. 71). In 2017, Alex Wong of *Buzzfeed* wrote a detailed and heartfelt journalistic piece about the Sharks and the tragic end to their season after losing the semifinal match in double overtime to the Minnesota Vixens. The premise of the article was to create visibility for a sport that is often forgotten and pushed to the wayside in favor of the male-dominated NFL, and even the Lingerie Bowl, which started as a Super Bowl half time spectacle. However, what the article really exposed was the standards of masculinity the female players are held to. As coach Rich Harrigan explains in the article,

“Football is the only sport that is male-dominated — there’s no version of women playing at a youth level...A lot of the gestures and the terminology and the nuances of the game are male-oriented — ‘cover your man,’ ‘man coverage’” (Wong, 2017, para. 20). Furthermore, images used in the article position women in male/masculine poses. One image features sisters Brilynn and Brooklyn Fields standing at the edge of the football field before a game. Both players are standing with their feet spread apart, their shoulders are accentuated by their pads, their helmets are held at their side, their faces have lines of black paint to stop glares from the stadium lights, and their faces are stern. The pose is unmistakably masculine. Their uniforms are black, the camera is pointed up at them, and the image oozes strength and power. Earlier in this dissertation I turned to work by Theberge (2000) on women’s hockey. As Theberge argued, despite the potential to offer empowerment as a women’s sport, the men’s version of the sport dominates.

As much as athleticism continues to be gendered by social norms and perceptions about sport, athletes continue to challenge these structures. Here I offer a further example of what a queer athleticism could look like. In the popular television show *Glee* (created by Ryan Murphy), we are introduced to a flamboyant character named Kurt Hummel (Chris Colfer). As an attempt to hide his sexuality from his father in the first season, Kurt joins the football team as a kicker in episode four titled “Preggers.” In order to successfully kick the ball during tryouts, Kurt adapts a sequence of steps from Beyonce’s “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It).” As the music plays, Kurt dances along to the music, embracing the feminine power of Queen Bey, giving him the confidence he needs to succeed. In dramatic fashion, Kurt kicks the ball through the goalposts as his team stands watching in amazement. As the episode progresses, quarterback Finn Hudson (Corey Monteith) convinces his team to learn the dance to “Single Ladies,” believing it would instill confidence in his team for the upcoming game. During that game, Hudson and this team



find themselves down by six points with less than one minute to play. In the final seconds of the game, Hudson calls his team to the huddle, encouraging them to use the dance as a way to confuse the opposing team in a last chance effort to win the game. Agreeing this was their only shot at winning, they approach the line of scrimmage and wait for the music to begin. As “Single Ladies” starts over the loud speakers, the players of McKinley High begin to dance, much to the shock of the opposing team. The opposing team and fans stand bewildered as 11 large men in football uniforms begin to move their bodies to an inherently feminine song. Hudson leads the team in a full out choreographed dance, complete with references to “putting a ring on it,” that end in a touchdown to win the game. While this is a fictional account, I use it here because queer athleticism has yet to be realized in mainstream sport. With the exception of figure skating happening every four years on national television, consumers of sport see very few instances of what queer athleticism could look like. Therefore, I turn to a publicly televised account in order to make my argument. In this instance of a nationally televised moment of sport, 11 men embraced the femininity of dance in order to be successful in the most masculine sport – football. Queer athleticism breaks free from gendered ways of doing sport that put expectations on athletes. It is here that we see a productive queering of sport.

### ***It's Not a Gay Thing; It's a Guy Thing***

As a culture, sport has long privileged male identities and male sports over female identities and female sports. This is apparent in numerous accounts of sport from media coverage, to player salaries, to availability and access to sport leagues. Unfortunately, the rise of LGBTQ athletes has done little to alter this trajectory. The second implication of this research is that attempts to queer sport still privilege male identities. In chapter three, I observed the ways in which quidditch, as an inclusive sport, maintained gender norms by using males more often than

females. In chapter two, I articulated the ways in which *Outsports* marginalized LGBTQ women by catering to a men's version of sport. The Authentic Identity narrative, the Athletic Success narrative, and the Social Acceptance narrative are driven by a commitment to include gay male athletes in sport. Both of these instances demonstrate that despite the queer potential of the case studies, male/masculine identities are still being privileged. Therefore, we are forced to confront the unfortunate truth that inclusion simply means assimilation. More specifically, this dissertation has revealed important implications regarding the relationship between identity and sport. Even when spaces like *Outsports* construct powerful narratives about LGBTQ inclusion in sport, what they are really doing is constructing a narrative about gay male inclusion and assimilation in sport. Consequently, these examples affirm that sport truly is a "guy's thing," and presents minimal risk to a bi-gender system that affirms their identity.

The privileging of male voices raises questions about what acts count as queer and disruptive in sport. I turn to this story of two gay rugby players sharing a celebratory kiss, which was shared by the *Gay Times* as an example. Journalist Daniel Megarry writes of the event,

Earlier this month, Australian rugby star Israel Folau caused outrage when he suggested that gay people would end up in "hell" unless they "repent of their sins and turn to God" in a now-deleted Instagram comment. Despite his comments appearing to break Rugby Australia's inclusion policy, the sports organisation [sic] decided against imposing a sanction on him, but that hasn't stopped LGBTQ people and their allies from speaking out against his homophobia. One of those people speaking their mind is former bobsledder Simon Dunn, who recently shared a photo of a 'victory kiss' with his partner Felix on social media. The two play together on a gay-inclusive London rugby club the Kings Cross Steelers. (Megarry, 2018, paras. 1-3)

In addition to the text of the article, the *Gay Times* shared the image posted to Dunn's social media account, which featured the two men engaged in a kiss following a rugby match. In the image, we see two burly men locked in a passionate embrace. One man wears his rugby uniform, having just competed in the match. While a brief shared moment of intimacy, to some it represents a strong political statement. In their critical work on the politics of queer kissing, Morris and Sloop argue that public performances of kissing, such as the one described above, can be seen as political performances, which are "not sufficiently recognized as such in ongoing discussion and debate of gay visibility within LGBTQ communities, but understood accordingly by those who see it as a chief threat to heteronormativity and seek its discipline" (2006, p. 3). For Morris and Sloop, man-on-man kissing in particular represents a *kairotic* moment of queer resistance to heteronormative structures. The argument of this dissertation complicates this notion, suggesting that sport is a powerful tool for disciplining queer bodies. Man-on-man kisses such as this, while resistant in the moment, are bound within a system that perpetuates hegemonic discourses through the commitment to a bi-gender system. In other words, as long as man-on-man kissing takes place within the male/masculine space of sport, it risks assimilation into an arena that already privileges male voices.

### ***Field Methods and Beyond***

In chapter three, I engaged in rhetorical field methods to explore how gender and athleticism are performed within the sport of quidditch. I argued that rhetorical field methods were an ideal approach to this chapter because it expanded opportunities for engaging with the rhetorical text in a specific cultural scene. As a final implication, I explore the need for moving sport research into the field, specifically through the use of rhetorical field methods. Doing rhetorical field methods in sport is crucial for understanding the ways in which athletes use

vernacular discourse to queer the heteronormative and sexist discourses of sport. By moving to the field, I argue that we can better interrogate the relationship between text and context in the world of sport. In engaging with the literature for chapter three, I built on studies by Popple (2015) and Segrave (2016), which offered theoretical and qualitative accounts of the sport of quidditch. Both scholars argued that the sport of quidditch works to queer sport in various ways. While both studies are important for understanding the queer potential of quidditch, I argue that rhetorical field methods fills the gaps that are left by not engaging with the sport at the level of performance. First, the use of rhetorical field methods revealed how athletes, fans, and participants rhetorically construct the queer space of quidditch. By physically altering the pitch, quidditch players construct their own performance space. Second, rhetorical field methods illuminated the ways in which individual players rhetorically construct gender and athleticism through identification with a position and with their team. By turning attention to the specific ways in which quidditch athletes perform within the queer space of quidditch, rhetorical scholars can better account for embodied performances of gender and athleticism. Only by interrogating the text on the level of performance and articulation can we fully engage with how the sport and those who participate in it construct a queer sport.

### **Future Research**

This dissertation is only a starting point for future research that approaches sport from a queer perspective. In her edited volume on *Sport, Sexualities, and Queer/Theory*, Jane Caudwell (2006) calls for sociological research that applies queer theory to sport. This dissertation is an answer to that call, bridging the gap between sociology, communication, and sport. However, there is still more work to be done, particularly in terms of other athletes, alternative sports, and individual moments of queer resistance. The Stonewall Sports National Games and the Gay

Games are two places on the margins where LGBTQ athletes are working to disrupt the culture of sport. The prevalence of these games suggests the need for change. However, the strict control placed on sport by owners, consumers, players, fans, and even the media make change seem impossible. Therefore, as queer rhetorical scholars, we must look for productive places to queer sport. It is with this in mind that I offer future directions for research.

One such area that could be explored by scholars interested in rhetoric, sport, and queer theory is the rise of LGBTQ athletes in the 2018 Olympic games. As I have shown with small examples using Adam Rippon and Gus Kenworthy, LGBTQ athletes had a strong showing at the 2018 Olympics. Future research could explore the queer discourse of the Olympics, particularly in America's fetishization of queer men. Following the conclusion of men's figure skating in PyeongChang, South Korea, *NBC* recruited Rippon as a figure skating correspondent. Recognizing the success of former figure skater Johnny Weir as an Olympic commentator, *NBC* saw potential in the new American figure skating favorite. Future research could explore the use of queer bodies to provide commentary about sport. This is a unique and unstudied area of research but has the potential to offer insight into the structures and norms of sport. In 2012 and 2014 Johnny Weir provided a queer account of the Olympics with fellow former figure skater Tara Lipinski. What is most queer about this is that Weir and Lipinski provided coverage not only for the winter Olympics, but for the summer games as well. Therefore, Weir and Rippon provide a fascinating moment to queer sport at the level of commentary.

Second, queer theory can productively aid conversations about transgender athletes in sport. As I articulated in chapter four, transgender athletes represent a unique public moral argument that pits "experts" against individuals. Scholars such as Sloop (2012), Young (2015), and Bumstead (2011) have approached the topic of transgender athletes such as Caster Semenya,

particularly in terms of public discourse. Future research should utilize queer theory to explore ways in which transgender athletes are disrupting sporting through participation. By turning to theories of embodiment, I argue that transgender athletes could serve as places of departure for the bi-gender model of sport. By turning to specific embodied forms of participation, we can utilize queer bodies as places of disruption.

Finally, as I articulated in chapter two, the *Outsports* website offers the potential for numerous areas of future research as it does much more than sport journalism. First, the website relies on the visual aspects of sports, particularly when it comes to bodies. By exploring *Outsports* as a place of visual rhetoric that queers the male gaze, the website could potentially disrupt gendered athletic bodies. Second, the website as a whole is crafted for a specific market, mainly white, affluent, gay men. While others certainly visit and view the website, it is important to problematize the type of athletes that are portrayed on the site. Future research could examine how the website rhetorically constructs the image of the audience and what this means for sport. Third, the website creates an archive of LGBTQ sport history, images, and content. Approaching the website from the study of archives or queer public memory illuminate how the website constructs the queer sport subject. Finally, looking for ways in which the *Outsports* website constructs female athletes and fans could be useful for queering sport.

The study of sport from a queer perspective is much needed in the discipline of communication. As a communicative activity, sport is essential for destabilizing social constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality. Using the case studies in this dissertation, I have engaged with the queer potential of sport by viewing individual performances of gender and athleticism as unstable differential relations. For now, however, the potential of the case studies in this dissertation remains to be fully realized.

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